

Fushi no Kami

REBUILDING CIVILIZATION

STARTS WITH A VILLAGE



3

Mizuumi Amakawa

Illustrator:

Mai Okuma

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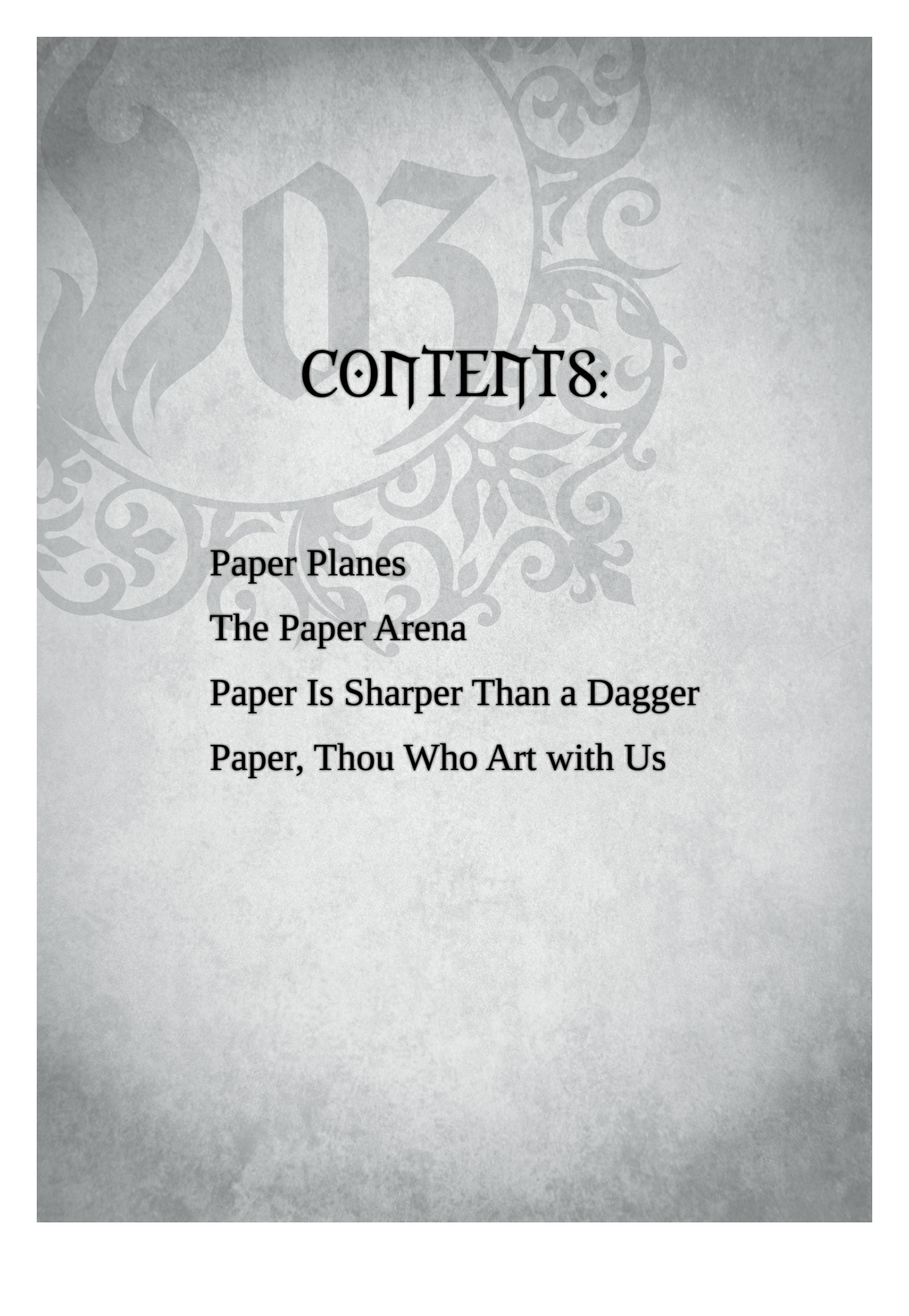


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Paper Planes

Yuika's Perspective

Noscula was usually a quiet village. There were fewer residents than in the city, and the only lively places were the fields during the mornings and evenings, since most villagers were farmers. On hot summer days like today, the village was especially tranquil even during broad daylight, as everyone was avoiding the harsh sunlight. It was as if the village itself had become sluggish, resting for the day. Even the annoying cries of the insects sounded lonely.

In this still atmosphere, the only times where the quiet was interrupted were the occasions when misfortunes happened. For instance, beast attacks or heavy rain and floods.

Fortunately, right now Noscula was... not very quiet at all. And it was not because of a beast or heavy rain, but rather something much worse.

It was because of the monster called Ash.

"Hello, David. Do you have some time?"

"Wha—? Ah, Mrs. Yuika, 'scuse me!"

David turned towards me. He was working in the fields under the scorching hot sun, which was shining so brightly that it seemingly left no shadows.

"Not at all. I'm sorry for disturbing you during work. I appreciate that you're working even in this hot weather."

"'Tis nothin'! Ash's workin' hard in the city, so the least I can do is to crank it up here!"

David wiped off the sweat of his sunburnt forehead with a towel that Ash had brought back from the city. The brand-new sickle in his hand reflecting the sunlight was yet another gift from Ash.

I was not sure what to think about all this. Currently, Ash was a fugitive, and I

was on a mission to capture him. That boy really didn't learn from his mistakes. He had sustained serious injuries from his fight with the werewolf. I had thought my heart was going to stop when he arrived back at the village together with a cash reward paid by my younger brother, the acting count Itsuki. Ash was supposed to stay here for his recovery.

As the daughter of the Count of Sacula, I had known many knights and guards who had lost their lives to werewolves. Among them were many top-class soldiers. To think that a young boy like Ash would engage in a fight with such a monster... Anyone would have wanted to give him a good scolding after hearing that. It was a miracle that he was still alive. I could not stress enough how relieved I was.

Naturally, what he needed the most right now was to get as much rest as possible. I had planned to gently tuck him into a bed at our house and have him concentrate on his recovery, but when I went to check on him for lunch, I found the bed empty. In an instant, I realized that he had run away. That boy could seriously not stand still, even when he had a life-threatening injury! Although, admittedly, it was hard to conceive of him as someone on the brink of death after seeing him arrive with a brimming smile on Quid's carriage, which was filled with presents from the city.

All the gifts, ranging from new hoes and sickles to clothes and cookware, really helped to make life in the village easier. I had no doubt that he had brought those things along in the hopes of softening the blow—that is, the scolding waiting for him. And it had worked. In the face of such a gesture, not even I could stay angry with him for too long. Regardless, I did my best to not let it show on my face. That was my duty as a parent. As his future mother-in-law.

Concealing my soft side, I asked David, "Speaking of Ash, did he happen to come by here?"

"Yeah, he was over there. He brought that new thing. Yer know that compost? I told 'im I 'member how to use it, but he kept buttin' in..."

David looked like he was enjoying himself even as he complained. He must have been happy he got to talk to his son again, or perhaps he was proud of his

achievements in the city. Probably both.

“I see... Do you know where he went afterwards?” I asked.

“Yeah, he said sumthin’ ’bout the church.”

“So he went to the church. Thank you, David. Please don’t overwork yourself in this heat.”

“Hahaha, dis much won’t kill me. I’m the father of the Bear Killer and the Werewolf Slayer!”

It seemed that Ash had gained a new nickname... He hadn’t actually slain the werewolf himself, but it was all the same to the villagers. Either way, it was impressive. Still, I needed to catch Ash and put him back to sleep after a good scolding as soon as possible.

As I opened the church door, I was greeted by a lively bunch of children. Some of them were frowning and groaning, one of them was proudly reading a book aloud, another one was teasing their neighbor out of boredom, and another one was annoyed at the latter. At this point, this had become the new normal for the village church during the day. The church had been shrouded in deserted silence for years, especially in the dark shadows of summer, but that wasn’t the case now. This was yet another miracle. There hadn’t been any study sessions here for decades until Ash came along.

Among the studying children stood a girl with silver hair. I called to her, “Tanya, do you have a moment?”

“Mrs. Yuika? Did something happen?”

“Well, it’s not like nothing happened, but it’s not related to Ban or Jigil.”

If anything had happened to the two hunters from her family, her pale face would have surely turned even paler. Luckily, it was just Ash who had disappeared from his bed. After I clarified the situation, Tanya put a hand on her chest and let out a big sigh of relief. Ban and Jigil were truly fortunate to have someone as cute as Tanya worry about them this much. Especially Ban. *If only they would just get married already.* The whole village already treated them as a married couple, and Jigil also seemed to grow impatient as of late.

“Oh, why are you here then?” Tanya asked.

“Well, I heard that Ash had come here...”

I looked around the church, but I couldn’t see him anywhere.

“If you’re looking for Ash—”

As Tanya opened her mouth, some of the other children around interrupted her.

“Big bro Ash helped me study just earlier!”

“He looks even more mature now after going to the city. Don’t you think so?”

“Yeah, he told us about life in the city.”

“When I told him, ‘I want to go too,’ he said to keep at it.”

All the information coming in at once overwhelmed me. It seemed that Ash’s energy had already started to spread to the other children... But that was a good thing.

“He’s right. If you study hard enough, you may be able to go study in the city. Like he said, keep at it!” I encouraged the little ones.

Judging from their quick and enthusiastic replies, it seemed that sending them to the city was going to be a real possibility. I was slightly worried about financing their studies, but thanks to Ash, we also had more and more leeway in that regard. If I asked Itsuki and Yae, they probably could help lower their living expenses, but either way, I had to seriously think about this sooner rather than later.

As I started going over the village’s revenue in my head, Tanya reminded me of my initial purpose. “Mrs. Yuika, if you’re looking for Ash, he’s at the back with Father Folke.”

“Ah, thanks, Tanya. So that’s where he’s hiding, huh? I’ll take note of our conversation about studying in the city. Everyone, good luck with your studies!”

I acknowledged the children’s lively response with a smile and waved at them before knocking on the door of the priest’s private study.

“Father Folke, it’s me, Yuika. Can I come in?”

“What? Oh, please come on in, Yuika. The door is open.”

I opened the door and quickly inspected the room, but there was no Ash to be seen. Father Folke was alone, sitting on his desk and furiously writing down something.

“Do you need anything?” he asked.

“Yes, I’m looking for Ash and I heard he was here...”

No matter how many times I looked around the small room, which was made even smaller by the stacks of books lying around, Ash was nowhere to be found.

“Ash left just a moment ago. I wish I could’ve talked to him a bit longer about the ancient language...”

“I guess we just missed each other, then. Do you know where he went?”

“He said he wanted to take a look at the water wheel. But I don’t know what he’s trying to achieve by looking at that broken thing.” Shrugging his shoulders, Father Folke put down his pen and stood up. “I guess now that Ash’s gone I might as well go and teach those kids. I can’t always leave everything to Tanya.”

He openly displayed his annoyance while stretching his back. This was not exactly befitting of a teacher, but he didn’t have a bad reputation among the children. Surprisingly, he apparently knew how to engage them. Maybe it was precisely his unpriestlike behavior that made him more approachable to the children. Tanya had also reported to me that his behavior probably made it easier for the children to ask him questions.

As if to prove my reasoning, when we both entered the main hall, the children immediately surrounded us.

“Oh, it’s Folke!”

“Folke, continue where you left off last time!”

“Please be quiet in the main hall. And I told you—no running in the church! Get in a line over there! The more you make a racket, the less time there will be for our lesson. Jean, bring that small rascal over here. Tanya, watch over there.”

Although they kept making a commotion, the children somehow obeyed Father Folke. As Tanya had once told me, they looked less like a teacher and his

students and more like a boss and his gang. As for his teaching style, he just continued with Ash's methods, which had even managed to motivate someone as averse to studying as Maika. The children must have been enjoying themselves as they experienced their own growth. Admittedly, I was in awe that Father Folke of all people kept these study lessons going so zealously... No one had expected the zombie priest to make such a comeback.

Anyway, I had to get back to finding Ash. The water wheel was, or rather used to be, next to the river. It had been broken for several years now. I wondered what Ash was planning this time.

As I wondered if I was going to be able to catch him this time around, I saw the little monster in the distance, near the river, staring at the ruins of the watermill with his arms folded.

"This is no good. It is too damaged. We will have to rebuild it from scratch. But in that case, I will not be able to afford the construction costs out of my own pocket. So, if we cannot do it right away, it might be better and cheaper to wait until the technology has improved some more..."

Yeah, there was no doubt. After all, who else would have thought about building a water wheel from scratch, and out of their own pocket at that? And on top of that, he was thinking about technological improvements? *I wonder what he's up to again...* I felt slightly scared to confirm it. So much so that I couldn't help but smile.

"Ash, are you interested in the water wheel?" I asked.

"Mrs. Yuika! You've come at the right time!"

Ash suddenly lit up when he noticed me. *I'm glad you're happy to see me, but aren't you forgetting that you sneaked out of bed?*

"I was just thinking of how inconvenient it is to not have a water wheel. Sure, one can eat the wheat without turning it into flour, but it is much tastier as wheat flour. Would you not agree? Besides, the more we expand the village, the more likely it will be that some work just cannot be done with human power alone. We should plan ahead for that eventuality."

Yes, he has completely forgotten. What a troublemaker.

I wondered how well Maika was managing to keep him under control in the city. I realized she was not able to control everything. In fact, Itsuki had already approached me several times asking what was wrong with this boy. Regardless, she needed to become able to properly take the reins if she wanted to make this cute monster into my son-in-law. *I guess I'll keep helping out for now. Let's trim the monster's claws just a little bit.*

In the short time that I had taken my eyes off him, Ash's claws had already become quite sharp again considering how much I had trimmed them before he left the village...

"Ash?"

"Yes, what is it?"

"Your lunch is already cold."

As I faced him with a sweet smile, it appeared that Ash finally remembered. He must have planned to be back by lunch, but lost track of time as he rampaged around the village. It was a bit too late to become pale now.

"Come, let's go back to bed." *So I can give you a good scolding.*

On this hot summer day, Noscula was overflowing with energy thanks to the cute monster that had appeared out of the blue. His rampage was surely going to leave its mark for quite a while to come. What a troublesome monster.



As I returned to the city after spending a month recovering in Noscula, it was decided that I was going to be awarded the Sacula first-class silver medal of battle bravery.

When I asked the superior officer, Sir George, what exactly that meant, he happily told me, "Explaining the words one by one, 'Sacula' refers to who's awarding the medal, 'silver' designates the degree of the achievement, 'battle bravery' tells you what kind of achievement it is, and finally in this case, 'first-class' refers to your battle with the demon."

"So, in other words, it is a token of praise from the Count of Sacula for my battle with the demon, which is considered a silver achievement," I

summarized.

“Easy to understand, right?”

“Very much so.” I nodded in agreement.

Apparently, second-class battle bravery referred to fights between humans, and third-class battle bravery medals were reserved for other kinds of special combat achievements. According to Sir George, the classification was the same for other regions. However, even the same awards were distinguished by their designs and dates, detailing the specifics of each incident. It was like a military medal showing what war you had taken part in. Furthermore, there were also unique medals specific to the taste of the rulers and the history of certain regions. For example, there was a steam medal awarded to people who found natural springs in a region known for its hot springs.

“How much of an honor is a silver achievement?” I asked.

“It is the most prestigious medal among the ones awarded on this occasion, and you are the only one who will receive it. You can be proud of yourself.”

“So it is the top prize this time around.”

I had expected a gold medal to be awarded as well, but it seemed that someone was very generous with their appraisal of me. In the end, it had been the guards on top of the city wall who killed the werewolf with a shot from the ballista, and I would have died if it were not for Sir George, who had come to rescue me at the last moment.

“It shows how valuable your intervention was. If it wasn’t for you, there would have been great losses.”

“As I have said before, it was a spur-of-the-moment decision...”

I had already said this after fighting Sir Bear, but I never wanted to do this again. When I returned to the village, my mother had reprimanded me endlessly. And this time Mrs. Yuika had also joined in to give me a good scolding. Once my injuries healed, Village Chief Klein made me train with him personally. That must have been his way of expressing his anger. Ban had also seemed fed up, and Father Folke had just choked with laughter. The only one praising me was my father. What a blow to my honor.

“By the way, you’ll be the youngest person on record to receive such a medal. Most definitely for the battle bravery category, but maybe even overall.”

“Well, going into battle at my age is not a very wise idea after all...”

As I replied with a sigh, Sir George showed a strained smile.

“You’re right, but you can cheer up a bit more.”

“Considering that the praise comes with double the amount of lecturing, I am not really in a merry mood...”

“Hm... Must have been tough...”

Leaving the village, I was reminded over and over again not to overdo myself, and once I got back to the city, Lady Maika and Lord Arthur gave me cold stares.

“But among all that, receiving a medal does help me relax a bit.”

“I hope you’ll be able to feel fully at ease. Really. Given your meritorious deed, you shouldn’t be so discouraged... Ah, right, there will also be a cash reward. So you should also be able to get yourself something nice—”

“You should have said that from the beginning! I can always use money to further my goals!” *Keep the money coming!*

I had a collection of articles on my wish list, ranging from small objects like writing tools to resources for experiments.

“You really do go all out when it comes to that...” Sir George murmured as if he had given up.

I guess you were earnestly trying to help me relax. But look, isn’t it best for a child to be full of energy?

There was going to be enough time to rest once I grew older. I was just going to put all my moments of relaxation into a savings account until then. Technically, they were not going to go to waste.

While I was talking to Sir George, the blacksmith finished his preparations. The craftsman approached us and slightly bowed his head. “I’m about to start the refining process,” he said.

“Yes, please continue!”

Today we had come to observe this refining process. The blacksmith was going to refine the strange remains of Sir Werewolf, who had almost killed me a month ago. Hearing that, I had to come and see it for myself.

The blacksmith's disciple stepped on the bellows to increase the firepower of the furnace, raising the air temperature in the workshop. The furnace was buried—or rather built—in the basement. It was overflowing with a dazzling red light shooting through the skin of the werewolf.

Performing a refining process on such a small scale was not very efficient, but unfortunately, this was the current standard of this world. It was not possible to acquire enough ore to warrant the construction of a larger refinery.

As a result of helping with the administrative work of the count, I had grasped the extent of the city's resources and trade goods, and came to the conclusion that, as a whole, this world's mining resources had been exhausted. Neither stones nor minerals were in circulation. There were no records on fossil fuels whatsoever either. Building stones for construction were extremely expensive, so much so that regular citizens could not get their hands on them. Normally, all building stones were bought with the city budget and used for the repairs of the city wall. In fact, there was not actually any real price attached to them, and their distribution required the approval of the king. No wonder there were barely any stone buildings or even facilities.

Judging from the Church's teachings warning against the dangers of insatiable greed, it was very much possible that the ancient civilization had used up all of the mining resources. When my research led me to that conclusion, I plunged into despair. Trying to bring about modernization and industrialization without coal and oil was beyond nightmare mode. At any rate, there was not enough firepower. Relying solely on firewood and charcoal was going to lead to the disappearance of all woods sooner rather than later.

On the more positive side, at least this explained the current level of civilization. Notwithstanding all the remnants of the ancient civilization, society was developing at a strangely slow pace because it lacked resources.

There was no glass or bricks to be seen either. Those could have been easily available already, considering these inventions dated back as far as the middle

or even the early period of civilization. It was possible to preserve that technology even with primitive means, and yet it no longer existed.

Most likely around the downfall of the ancient civilization, when it became impossible to get hold of fossil fuels, they had started cutting down trees to obtain a substitute energy source. This in turn probably led to complete deforestation, bringing about an era without even wood and charcoal to manufacture glass or bricks. As a result, knowledge and technology were both swept from the face of the earth.

Surprisingly, this might also explain the existence of certain out-of-place artifacts. The furnace that was emitting extreme heat right now at the blacksmith's workshop was very primitive. Its thermal efficiency was so bad—just watching it made me uneasy. Given that we were not able to use any fossil fuels, we should have used our forest resources sparingly to make them last longer.

“First, we’ve got aluminum here.” As I was glaring at the gluttonous furnace, the blacksmith started explaining the process.

The molten metal that the furnace had spit out just now was aluminum. That was used for this world's cheapest currency, the white coins. Next, in order of melting points, it extracted silver, copper, and iron. In addition, around 30 kilograms of refined scraps came out.

It turned out that the body of a werewolf was made up of a wide assortment of metals. Currently, it was mostly its fur, as well as some dried meat and bones, lying inside the furnace. Since the werewolf was essentially a living creature clad in metal armor, it was only natural that you could extract metal from it... *Or that's what I'm telling myself. No matter how you look at it, this is just pure fantasy logic.*

It was hard for me to believe because of my common sense originating from my past life, but since the extraction of minerals seemed hopeless, I welcomed obtaining some metals in this way. The fixed supply of metals, and their circulation in the form of money, must have been due to the fact that they could be obtained from demons. Apparently, even a fantasy setting that put humans at a disadvantage showed some humane kindness. Although it was just

the bare minimum. I would not have minded if we had gotten spoiled a bit more.

As I enthusiastically nodded to my own thoughts, Sir George inquired with great interest. “Did you see everything you wanted to see here?”

“Yes, I have a grasp of the situation.”

The improvement of the furnace and stove came next. That was the first step in my long and precipitous manufacturing development plan. I needed to write it down and calculate an estimated budget.

“I need to look for books at the temple,” I told Sir George.

“I knew you were going to say that,” he said as he cleared his throat to hide his laughter. “Although I don’t really understand your conclusion.”

I no longer understood whether he understood or not. Regardless, he looked quite happy in spite of his remarks.

Both Sir George and I headed back towards the dormitory while discussing the upcoming schedule of the regional troops as well as the army academy.

I was holding on to the refining scraps that had been designated as trash. I was hoping that they contained some more useful metal that we were just not able to extract yet with the current technology. Although I did not know when I was going to obtain any profits from it, if any.

After devising the manufacturing development plan, the first thing I needed to do was carefully explain the situation and enlist help from my partners. We had to recreate the success of the agricultural development plan.

At this time, Lady Maika and Lord Arthur should have been at the dormitory. That morning, Lady Reina also said that she was going to be there, so I decided that I would start by capturing—I mean, approaching her.

As I arrived at the gate, it turned out I was going to meet her sooner than expected.

“Everyone, stop!” Lady Reina exclaimed in a resolute voice.

Usually she was a quiet girl, but she often raised her voice to scold the

mischievous rascals of the academy. Since her mother was also the supervisor of the dormitory, most disturbances calmed down after a rebuke from her.

“Are you listening? I said stop!” she repeated.

However, it did not seem to be working today. It was unusual to hear her growl this impatient when scolding others.

“I am a bit worried to hear Reina shout like that,” I said.

“Yeah, let’s hurry over there!” Sir George urged.

We both looked at each other before rushing over towards the girl’s voice. Lady Reina was not too well versed in martial arts, so if it came down to a fight, she probably would not have been able to subjugate anyone.

Sure enough, there was a scuffle happening in the garden of the dormitory. It was quite one-sided, as it was three versus one... but the one person alone was rather fiercely lunging at the others.

“That’s enough!” Since the situation had gone long past a simple quarrel, Sir George intervened.

The forceful arbitration of an active-duty knight managed to break up the fight and separate both parties for the time being. The group of three people consisted of Moldo and his gang, and the boy who had challenged them by himself was Hermes.

Hermes was a member of our study group and the son of an influential blacksmith in the city. He did not talk much to others and gave off the impression of an obedient and introverted child. However, he was currently glaring with bruises on his face at Moldo and his gang like a wounded animal. He probably was the type of person who was usually quiet but could become scary when angered.

“What the hell happened?” Sir George interrogated both sides while staring them down to make sure the fight would not resume.

“He started the fight!” Moldo was the first to speak up.

Hermes, on the other hand, sank into silence without denying the statement or defending himself. He was always this uncommunicative, even at the study

group. As a result, he was usually alone. However, since he was also exceedingly passionate about studying, no one disliked him.

Not being able to just watch her fellow student being accused without saying anything, Lady Reina sighed and explained the situation to Sir George. “Moldo and his friends were the ones who started meddling. They teased and provoked Hermes until he threw a punch at them. I can’t really blame him.”

It was not so much that she was favorable towards Hermes, but that she disliked Moldo and his friends. She then gave them a cold stare of death.

I wondered what had provoked Hermes to challenge those three...

“Hermes, what did they say?” Sir George asked the silent boy in a sharp tone in an attempt to determine who was at fault and worthy of punishment.

Most children would not have been able to resist such a forceful question from a senior figure, but Hermes still bit his tongue. His firm, iron-like gaze reflected his stubbornness. At the same time, he also looked as if he was going to burst into tears at any moment.

“Hermes, you have to explain yourself.” A worried Lady Reina, who knew what had happened, tried to help him along. She frowned as she tried to persuade him with the expression of an older sister rebuking her younger brother.

Hermes caught a fleeting glance of her, but continued to stay silent for a while. Sir George waited motionlessly for the young boy, who was preparing himself to speak up. Eventually, Hermes showed us a lump of iron that he was firmly grasping in his left hand.

Staring at the piece of iron, Hermes said, “They saw this and said that it could never fly...”

Sir George tilted his head when he saw what Hermes was holding in the palm of his hand. Lady Reina did not seem to know what it was either. Moldo and his gang were mockingly smiling. Meanwhile, I felt a dopamine rush in my brain.



“Oh?! This is wonderful!”

It felt as if my body teleported itself towards Hermes to take a closer look at the object in his hand.

What I had thought of as a lump of iron was in fact a delicate handiwork. The main body was shaped like a cigar, with wings and the blades of a pinwheel attached to it. No doubt this was a model aircraft. It was slightly crooked here and there, but it was almost perfectly recreated.

“It is a monoplane! And the propeller can rotate too! Very intricate,” I exclaimed full of interest.

“You know what it is?”

I nodded after hearing Hermes ask me with glimmering eyes.

In my past life, planes were not a rare sight by any means. I had even been on one. Although that one was a passenger plane with a jet engine. The ones with a reciprocating engine I had only seen in classic movies.

“Where did you get hold of this? I have never seen a model aircraft before,” I asked.

“I made it myself. I’m the son of a renowned blacksmith, after all.” He smiled slightly proudly.

“Oh! That is even better! Do you like aircraft?”

“Yes, very much. They are so stylish and can fly in the sky! And they are fast! Faster than a bird!” Hermes spoke vividly with a bright expression.

Meanwhile, Lady Reina stood in surprise next to him. She was not so much surprised at the forgotten concept of aircraft, but rather at the talkativeness of Hermes. I had never seen him like that either. Where had the stubbornly quiet boy from just earlier gone?

“Years ago, I saw the picture of a machine flying in the sky in a book at the temple. This is my attempt at recreating it. The rotating part was difficult to make,” he explained.

“It is a superb model. You must have put in a lot of effort to get this far on

your own. I assume you would also like to make a real flying machine one day?"

"Of course!" Hermes replied while strongly clenching his fist. "That's why I asked my father to let me enroll at the academy. I want to learn how to read books so I can research how to make this machine fly! And someday..."

His gaze wandered towards the blue sky. Nothing else around him seemed to matter.

I knew this look all too well. It was the same one that Father Folke had when he attempted to decipher the language of the ancient civilization. He was prepared to go after his dream no matter how exhausting or painful it would be. He was ready to go beyond one thousand nights and still not achieve his goal. He was looking through an out-of-focus super telephoto lens to make out the contours of a dream which may never come to fruition. As a result, he did not notice the easy path at his feet. But that was only natural. It was pure joy to chase a dream so reckless that others tried stopping you. It felt great to burn with passion and love. Even when you failed and were full of regrets, it was fun to curse the ground upon which you fell. And it was the greatest feeling of all to swear revenge towards that bright light shining in the sky.

I knew that feeling all too well. I was the same. And as such, I could not help but honestly praise my fellow dreamer.

"That is a wonderful dream," I said.

Moldo and his gang burst out laughing. They were murmuring some ridicule, but I did not mind them. People who laughed at others for daring to dream big were people of small caliber. However, unlike me, Hermes did not have the emotional maturity that I had carried over from a past life. He looked openly displeased. You could almost hear the sound of his grinding teeth just by looking at his face. His mouth was once again closed, and his cheerful expression from earlier, when he was talking about his dream, seemed like a mere illusion now.

I see...

It was possible that Hermes was usually so silent because others had always made fun of his ambitions. Any innocent young boy would have naturally closed himself off in the face of such mockery. In that regard, I had truly been

privileged. Father Folke was a middle-aged man who had been chasing his own dreams long before me, and Mrs. Yuika had accepted me with open arms. Lady Maika always praised me, saying I was amazing, and helped me where she could. It would have been tragic to let the ambitions of this young boy go to waste. That's why... I decided to pass on the kindness that I had received from Mrs. Yuika and the others.

"Hermes, I will help you achieve your dreams."

It must have been the first time he heard these words, since it took him about three seconds to respond.

"...What?"

"The revival of a machine that only exists in the records of the ancient civilization sounds wonderful. I was just thinking of writing up a manufacturing development plan. I will help you to achieve your dreams."

Moldo and his gang's laughter had become even louder and more vulgar, but I did not feel annoyed in the slightest. I was an adult in mind, and they were still children. There was no way I would be seriously angry at them. As such, my next line was directed towards Hermes with just a hint of self-interest mixed in.

"Let us work together to shut up those loud people over there." *Until they're at a loss for words.*

For some reason, Hermes' facial expression stiffened when he looked at me. He must have been trying to control his anger towards Moldo and his friends. Maybe he did have an adult mind just like me, after all.

"May I interrupt, Ash?" Sir George interjected with a business-like voice.

"What is the matter?"

"Well, I'm sorry to interrupt, but according to the academy's rules, there needs to be a punishment for engaging in a fight. Even if there was a verbal dispute, Hermes was still the first one to throw a punch..."

"Sir George." *Are you seriously going to get in my way?*

I smiled cheerfully and looked at him with puppy dog eyes. While he hesitated for a moment, Sir George, who was trusted by the acting count due to his overly

serious demeanor, shook his head.

“I can’t make light of the rules. This academy is supposed to educate future leaders.”

“I see. In order to lead a group, you need to show discipline and adhere to the rules. You are of course quite right.”

I carefully considered his position, but I was not ready to give up yet. People who laughed at others’ dreams deserved punishment.

“However, Sir George,” I continued. “If we are talking about behavior as a leader, is it not dangerous to scold someone this talented for a meager mistake? You run the risk of dampening his enthusiasm and shackling his talent.”

“Hmm... But I can’t just let it slide...”

I tried manipulating the situation by exchanging the words “breaking the rules” with “meager mistake” and “punishment” with “scolding.” As a result, it appeared that Sir George’s stance was softening. *I have to push him just a little bit more.*

“Please think about it. Is there anyone else at the academy, or even in the whole kingdom, who is trying to revive a long-lost machine that can fly in the sky?”

There were probably a few people if you looked throughout the kingdom. Especially if you asked among Father Folke’s research peers in the capital.

“Hermes has been coming up with unique ideas and has put them into action like no one else could have done. There is no one like him in the whole kingdom! If you do not call that a rare talent, then what is it?”

I heard something coming from the direction of Lady Reina. It sounded like she was saying, “You are one to talk.” *Well, I’m a special case outside the norms.*

“And if you still think that Hermes’ talent is not enough to excuse a mere squabble between children, please give us two weeks. We will show you the possibility of reviving the technology for soaring through the heavens!” Then, I

quickly remembered to put Hermes in the spotlight. "...Under the guidance of Hermes!" I added. That was close. I almost talked as if I was the one in charge.

However, this time around Hermes had to be the center of attention. I was merely an assistant. It was going to assist Hermes' achievement. Either way, I was happy as long as Moldo shut up.

"Ash... I don't know what's going on..." Hermes muttered.

Don't worry, Hermes. I'll help you. A lot. I already know exactly what we need to do. It's all backed up by my past-life memories. So don't you worry at all.

Lady Reina affectionately tapped on the shoulders of the bewildered Hermes. "Don't worry! Maika and Arthur will make sure he doesn't behave too recklessly, so just go with it for now!"

Hermes just looked as if he had been dealt a finishing blow.

Outraged by Moldo and his gang's unfair treatment of Hermes, Lady Maika, Lady Reina, Lord Arthur, and I took action to protect our fellow academy student and member of our study group. Since Mother Yae had also joined us as a third-party observer, it was already clear who was on the right side of justice in the eyes of the three gods.

"So, it is decided, then! We will strive for a peaceful resolution by helping Hermes revive aeronautical technology!"

After hearing my proclamation in the reading room of the temple, everyone but Hermes agreed.

"Got it! What do we have to do?" Lady Maika said enthusiastically.

"You've just come back from your recovery and you're already in full swing again. Are you sure you'll be alright? Anyway... Is there anything I can do?" Lord Arthur asked as if they had given up.

"I was unable to stop you in front of Sir George, so I went along with it, but... You realize that there are limits to what we can do?" Lady Reina said.

"Hm, an aircraft. Among the many legends of the ancient civilization, this one seems the farthest away from our reach. I don't think there are many practical books on the subject here at the temple," Mother Yae added.

Luckily, everyone had grown accustomed to my modus operandi, so there was no need for much discussion. On the other hand, the inexperienced Hermes, who had joined us for the first time, was racking his brain after looking around the room.

“It all sounds a bit off to me... Are you sure you’re all alright?” he said.

Similar to Hermes, who was apparently questioning our sanity, I looked at everyone’s face before answering his question. “Do we not look alright?”

“It’s honestly a bit frightening to see everyone so calm... Usually, when talking about flying in the sky, people say things like, ‘That’s nonsense!’ or ‘That’s impossible’... I expected everyone to be a bit more baffled.”

Since I had memories of my past life, flying machines were a matter of course for me, but he might have been right with regard to the common sense of this world. The others’ reactions when I raised the topic were surprisingly calm.

As I thought to myself, they all chimed in.

“Nothing Ash says can surprise me anymore,” Lady Maika remarked.

“If anything, I was surprised that someone other than Ash broached the matter,” Lord Arthur said looking at Hermes.

“I’ve gotten used to it thanks to Ash,” Lady Reina said.

“I expected Ash to say something like that sooner or later,” Mother Yae added.

Seeing that I seemed to be at the center of it all, I could only let out a strained laugh.

Hermes looked at me with dubious eyes.

To answer his obvious questions, I said, “I mean, I have been talking about my own dream for a while now, so I guess me saying that I want to build an aircraft would not really surprise anyone.”

“What’s your dream, Ash?” Hermes asked.

Bringing back the plentiful life of the ancient civilization.

Aircraft were one part of that. It was only natural that the project members

were no longer surprised by my ambitions.

As I explained all this to Hermes, his jaw dropped. “Bringing back the life of the ancient civilization?! Does that mean you want to make stuff like the machine that can produce ice? The ones that can keep the room cool in summer and produce heat without fire? Even that thing which allows you to listen to music and watch pictures wherever and how often you want?”

“Yes, including all of that, I want to be able to live a happy and fun life. That is my dream.”

After all, the hot summer heat made me yearn for an air conditioner and a freezer.

“Wow...” Hermes let out a big sigh. It was unclear whether he was impressed or shocked. But just when I thought he was going to curl up in his chair, he started shaking with laughter. “Hahaha! You dream big! I give up! That’s quite a big dream right there!” He kept repeating that same line over again. “This is the first time I’ve met someone with a dream bigger than mine. I really don’t know what to say, Ash!” While his face wrinkled from laughter, he started shedding tears. “No wonder you listened to my dream without laughing.”

Those were tears of profound joy.

Lady Reina, who was sitting next to him, held out a handkerchief with a smile on her face.

Wiping off his tears, Hermes murmured one single word. “Thanks.”

Seeing Hermes like this, I realized how hard it was to have a dream in a poor society. If you were desperate just to survive, any plans for the future would only seem like excessive burdens.

I knew that feeling very well. I had felt the same until that fateful day when Mrs. Yuika read that story aloud to us. I wondered what my eyes had looked like before then. I imagined they were probably similar to those of a dead fish.

That was yet another reason to improve the living standards of society as a whole as soon as possible. We needed more young people who could dream big, study hard, and go on to achieve their dreams.

Of course, I considered myself among those who flapped their wings of hope towards a better future. And if our paths happened to cross, as they had with Hermes this time around, the fulfillment of their dreams would ultimately also mean the fulfillment of mine. I was ready to help them one after the other so that in turn they would also help me. After all, kindness is repaid by kindness. It was time to expand that circle of generosity.

After reflecting and crying for a while, Hermes folded the now wet handkerchief and looked up. "I'm sorry you had to see me like this."

As he awkwardly sniffled, Lady Reina reassured him with her gentle voice. "Not at all. You have a wonderful and admirable dream."

"Well, I guess I'm a bit proud of myself too."

His bashful smile made him look more cheerful than ever. The room, which had fallen completely silent, slowly became filled with a sense of passion.

Since it was a nice atmosphere, I figured it was a good time to make some decisions. Cheerfulness was important for any meeting. It helped you rush through even the most arduous tasks.

"Let us discuss our plans moving forward, then! Is everyone on board? Where should we start?" I asked everyone.

Just when I had thought about improving the efficiency of the furnace and stove, the matter of aeronautical technology had come in flying at full speed, leaving my plans in shambles. Moreover, the latter goal came with the secondary objective of beating Moldo and his gang in a lawful and peaceful way.

As I wavered, Lady Maika raised her hand. "May I? What do you have in mind for now, Ash?"

"Improving the furnace and the stove, as well as producing a simple model of an aircraft."

"Here I was thinking you were hesitating, but it turns out you already had two things in mind," she reacted to my answer with a smile.

Aside from Lady Maika, who seemed content with my answer, the others

looked astonished.

As a representative, Lord Arthur raised their hand. “Normally, just one of those would already be considered a huge undertaking, so bringing up two tasks of such magnitude at the same time is a bit questionable.”

It's not like I had any other choice. One of them just appeared out of nowhere.

Besides, both tasks belonged to the sphere of the manufacturing industry, so it was possible to argue that it was just one large task rather than two.

“You are quite right, Arthur. However, just when I was thinking about planning the improvement of the furnace and stove, which was supposed to be the first step in my industrial improvement plan, Hermes came along, so I decided to put everything together.”

“You’re something else. To treat the pipe dream of flying through the skies with a machine as an extra... How eccentric...” It looked like Hermes had been blown away as he muttered those words.

Lady Reina assured him that it was nothing unusual and tapped his shoulder.

“Is there any point in doing them together?” Lord Arthur asked.

“Hermes can assist me with my plan and I can help him achieve his dream, so it makes sense to work on them at the same time.”

Lord Arthur showed a strained smile in response to my loose explanation and said, “What shall we do, Maika? This sounds very Ash-like, and I don’t feel like arguing anymore.”

“Yeah, why not!”

“You’re not going to stop him?!” Lord Arthur looked as if they had been betrayed.

On the other hand, Lady Maika, who had delivered them a ruthless blow with her dagger of words, nodded with the amount of composure of someone who had just strangled a chicken. “If Ash says it, there must be a good reasoning behind the plan. Besides, the bigger the plan, the easier it will be to receive funding and enlist personnel. As long as we handle the implementation of his plan well enough, there shouldn’t be any problems.”

For optimal returns, we had to focus on using the resources currently available to us. The rest could come later.

As I gave a thumbs up to the supportive and understanding Lady Maika, her whole face lit up. She was right—I had a plan. It was not like I had just gone along with a new and sudden challenge on a whim.

While my aim was to increase industrial power, that was quite vague in itself. In the short-term, that goal encompassed the improvement of the stove and furnace, allowing for the production of brick. However, I was not going to stop there. That was merely a foundation from which I would set out to improve everything else, ranging from processing technology to production capacity to development capabilities. More specifically, I wanted to bring them up to the standards of the ancient civilization.

However, that plan in itself was not entirely feasible. The scope was a little too big and the objective a bit too far off in the future. Just a little bit. So, how about making a compromise and focusing on the revival of aeronautical technology? That entailed the revival of a large compilation of industrial technology, such as the creation of the internal combustion engine, the manufacturing of light yet durable alloys, the development of precise construction techniques, and more advanced processing technology. Therefore, it was easier to make a rough estimate of how much things would improve for both the people making the plans and those simply observing.

Above anything else, the idea of flying through the skies was easy to understand and greatly appealed to anyone who had some adventurous spirit in them. This helped shine a good light on the project. It was similar to how men and women of all ages were more likely to support technology for going to the unexplored moon rather than offensive missile technology. Public opinion was always important, after all.

The problem was that, from a practical point of view, the objective was still too far away. Not nearly as far away as raising everything to the standards of the ancient civilization, but still distant enough to be dazzled by the prospects. Just a little bit.

Therefore, I had to split up the project into smaller steps, gradually working

towards the full accomplishment of our goals. The first part was going to cover about a tenth of the whole, the second one the next tenth, and so on. Although, in reality, it was probably closer to one hundredth. Be it the internal combustion engine, the shaft, the ball bearing, gears, or nanotechnology, there were still too many undeveloped or completely nonexistent technologies.

Originally, I had planned on making the wood gas vehicle the first step, but since Hermes came along, I pushed myself just a little bit and raised the bar to building an aircraft. In terms of difficulty, it was something along the lines of climbing stairs with stilts.

As I explained all of that to Lady Reina, she let out a sigh after carefully examining my words. “As usual, I don’t know if your ideals are too high for me to see them possible or if you’re not keeping your feet on the ground.”

“Any ideals that are not down-to-earth are merely wishful thinking.”

In that regard, Hermes was walking on the right path. He had started out by trying to acquire the ability to read in order to research the structure of aircraft. It may have only been the first step when faced with the enormous mountain of advanced knowledge relating to aeronautical technology. However, the difference between moving just one step forward and not moving at all was like night and day. That one small step opened up limitless possibilities.

Hermes, who had taken that step to chase his dream, slowly digested my proposal before tilting his head. “Until now, no one has been willing to help me, so that alone already is great. I’m willing to listen to what Ash has to say. However...” He looked at me as if he was not yet completely convinced. “Is it possible that you already know quite a bit about aircraft?”

“I know that our current technical capabilities are not sufficient to build one.”

“I knew it! I didn’t know how to go about flying in the air at all, but it looks like you know a bit more. Like, what are we lacking and stuff like that.” He was grinning while talking. “Could you give me some examples of what we need?”

“Of course, I will tell you everything I know. But first, we should make a machine that actually flies through the skies!”

Hearing those words, Hermes’ grin grew even broader. He even bent himself

over the table as if he could no longer wait to get started.

“Hey, how do you go from saying that we lack the technology to claiming that we can make something that flies through the skies?” Lord Arthur protested.

“Well, it is just a tiny first step.” *It’s so simple that I even remember making one in crafts class during elementary school in my past life. Even with the current level of technology of this world, it shouldn’t be hard to recreate.*

I was thinking of making a rubber-band-powered paper plane as a prototype for our industrial improvement plan.

“Since it looks like Hermes wants to get started right away, let us divide up tasks. Maika, can you lead one group to research brickmaking?”

“I don’t really know much about bricks, but leave it to me! Just tell me what I need to do!”

As expected, I could rely on her.

“Well then, could you please research the manufacturing process of bricks together with Arthur and Mother Yae? That is the first step in our industrial improvement plan.”

Lady Reina and Hermes, whom I had not named, looked at each other.

“Reina and Hermes, you will help me bring back aeronautical technology! Let’s prove wrong all those who think that flying is just a pipe dream!” *So much so that their hearts will stop!*

Delighted, Hermes clenched his fists. I already considered him a reliable partner and returned his gesture with a fist bump.

Lady Reina looked at us with watery eyes. “I see you both are getting along well already. Somehow it feels like now there are two people who are up to no good... I think I’m going to cry...”

Lady Maika and Lord Arthur rushed to comfort the teary-eyed Lady Reina.

Hermes’ Perspective

The first time I saw an airplane, it lit up a fire inside of me. It was during a visit

to the temple with my father, who was talking some complicated stuff with one of the priests. I didn't know why, but there was a large book lying open on the desk. Maybe the priest was repairing it. It was a book on technology from the early period of ancient civilization. *I still remember looking into it after feeling drawn towards it. That must've been the exact moment my life went off course.*

At first, it looked like a strangely shaped windmill. *Now that thought makes me laugh.* I was looking at a propeller. That odd first impression was quickly dispersed by my next discovery. A long, slender body equipped with horizontally stretched wings. Yes, wings. Bird wings made out of steel. Strangely enough, looking at that shape my instincts told me that this was meant to fly in the air.

Then, I remembered my dad talking about a machine that was able to fly through the skies called a "plane." It was one of the many dream-like stories from the period referred to as "the ancient civilization." This iron bird must have been a plane, I thought. This thing could fly like a bird, riding on the wind, soaring through the beautiful blue sky. How fascinating! I had never seen anything like it before! No doubt riding one of those must have been the most exciting pastime in the world!

Something lit up inside of me. I felt an inexplicably strong yet pure urge to fly. I yearned for the skies. I felt so delighted that I wanted to scream out of joy. This was it. This was what I wanted to do. This was what I was meant to do. I needed a plane. I wanted to build a plane. This was all I needed. I wanted to make an iron bird, one that could carry people across the blue sky. Everyone would be happy. Why? Was there any need to think about that when you could fly in the air? Even though I had only thought about it, I was delighted and I felt my whole body burn with passion. The dream of making a plane had set my life ablaze.

The rest was easy. All I had to do was to give shape to my dream by making a plane. But everyone, including my dad, the priest, the rest of my family, and all the adults around me told me that it was impossible. Airplanes were considered a thing of the ancient past, and no one really believed in them. Unlike birds, humans were unable to fly. They called it a stupid fantasy.

I talked back to them with a sullen look on my face, crying my eyes out

embarrassingly. I told them that there was no reason humans shouldn't be able to fly when birds could do it. We just needed to copy them. Or even copy insects. If you needed something specific to fly in the air, then surely it could be found in nature.

Once again, everyone replied the same without exception, saying that it was impossible. That it was never going to happen. After all, no human had ever flown before. *Really? What about the book?* It showed a plane, a machine capable of flying through the skies. Didn't that mean that people used those in the past? So people had in fact flown before. Still, none of the adults acknowledged me. They insisted that it was a story from a long time ago, and no one knew whether it was true or not. They insisted that no human could fly. Neither they nor I had ever flown. In conclusion, it was not possible.

That was the end of the discussion. Not that I had wanted it to end, but they just walked away. I just kept repeating to myself, "It doesn't make any sense." *What about the book?* There were others as well. According to the priest, there were several books mentioning planes. If it really had all been a lie, then why did everybody know about planes? Why did they know the name of the machine that could fly in the air when they refused to believe that humans could fly? *Don't try putting out the fire of my dream with your shower of cheap words! I won't let my precious dream die this easily!* Nevertheless, no one believed me. The only ones supporting my ambitions were the books about planes.

Afterwards, I studied more about planes until I realized that the full term was "airplane" and that it was just one kind of various "aircraft." Still, I did not know how to make a machine that could fly. I needed to study even more. I had to find more books to read. There was a limit to the knowledge that could be obtained at the house of an artisan. In that case, I had to choose between going to the temple and becoming a priest or going to the army academy. Ready to go to either one, I asked my dad, who decided to send me to the latter. Apparently, the count had a child my age who happened to attend the academy too. My dad must have seen this as an opportunity for me to make connections, but unfortunately, I was only interested in studying.

While I already knew how to read and calculate to a certain extent, whenever

I opened a book about airplanes, I didn't understand a single thing. I had looked forward to studying at the academy, but I wasn't really learning anything new. There were children of knights and village chiefs who couldn't read as well as I did, so the level of the classes was not that high. As a result, I wasn't moving forward.

As I started to get sulky soon after the academy had begun, one of the priests approached me. "Oh! If it isn't the airplane kid!"

I recognized the beautiful black-haired woman. Three years ago, when the adults around me all repeated that airplanes were a fantasy, she was the only one who defended my dream, saying that, "Considering that there are so many written accounts, it is highly probable that they existed in real life."

"Morning, Yae."

Since then, I had come to read books here at the temple and run into her several times. She was one of my few... well, not really friends, but acquaintances.

"Good morning. It has been a while. So you've come to the academy, huh? I'm one of the teachers representing the Church."

"I've heard."

Yae was beautiful, and as a result, quite popular among the boys. Even someone like me, who almost never talked to anyone, had heard about that.

"By the way, are you attending the joint classes? If I remember correctly, you already know how to read and write quite well... I feel like it may be unnecessary for you to attend reading class at least."

"To be honest, it's boring."

For the record, I had asked to be exempt from reading classes in my personal statement, since I already knew how to read. However, it seemed that they hadn't believed me. Even though my dad was a renowned blacksmith, I was still just the son of a mere craftsman. Considering that even many of the successors of knights and village chiefs weren't able to read and write, I guess I couldn't blame them.

“What a waste!” Yae frowned as anger overcame her beautiful face. The anger appeared to be directed towards herself rather than a third person. “I was so preoccupied with Arthur that I neglected my other duties. And on top of it all, Ash... No, this was an oversight on my part. No matter how unexpected Ash’s behavior is, it is still my responsibility!”

She lowered her head in an elegant manner. Captivated by her movements, it took me a moment to realize that she was apologizing to me, which in turn caused me to start sweating.

“Please excuse my oversight. I have a grasp of your abilities. For the moment, you don’t need to attend the joint classes. Please read any book you like. That will be more beneficial to you and to the books.”

“You... don’t need to apologize...”

After all, she wasn’t the only teacher here. It appeared that she was in charge of something else, so she was not among the core staff for the joint classes.

Nevertheless, she emphasized what she considered to be her own ineptitude with an iron-like, stiff voice. “No, I’m guilty of delaying the pursuit of knowledge of a brilliant student. As a priest, I can only be ashamed of myself. I’ll take this as an opportunity to reflect upon myself and make sure it won’t happen again.”

“...Thanks.”

She was about the only one who called me brilliant.

“Alright, then I will inform the joint classes’ headteacher that you will no longer attend. You can study by yourself starting today. Once they start teaching writing and maths, please go back to class.”

I tried communicating my deep gratitude to Yae, but...

“...Thanks.”

In the end, all that came out was just one cold, short word.

There were so many things that I wanted to tell her, but at some point, my communication skills had deteriorated. I didn’t enjoy talking to others. When I talked about my dream, the others always ridiculed me for it, so I started keeping it to myself. People told me that I had become silent and gloomy, but

hearing those concerns coming from the main cause of my behavior only made me angrier. Their words were like water trying to extinguish the burning passion inside of me.

Still, I managed to protect my dream by embracing it tightly inside my chest, where it kept on burning. So much so that it even hurt. Since it was burning, it was only natural that I would hurt myself touching it. Thinking about it, I had trouble breathing, and my expression stiffened. Somehow, I was sure that one day my dream was going to turn me into ashes. But I didn't care. It was my dream. Even if it killed me, that would be better than dying after giving up. *That's how much the plane in that book had inspired me.*

Suddenly, a group of four boys and girls came out of the reading room. For some reason, they seemed to be enjoying themselves while talking loudly. It was Ash's group. In terms of social standing, it may have been better to say it was Arthur or Maika's group, but no matter how you looked at it, Ash was the center of attention. How strange. At any rate, they really seemed to enjoy themselves.

"It's not like I hate talking to people or anything..."

Although it hadn't got to the point where I couldn't talk at all, I had become awkward at holding a conversation. However, if I talked about machines soaring through the sky and someone replied saying, "That sounds amazing," I imagined I could keep on talking for hours. No one ever said that, though. Not that it mattered. I still had my dream.

I held my hand to my chest to confirm the heat flowing through my palm. *Ah, yes, it's alright. The flame is still burning.* Although... it felt less hot somehow. Maybe I had kept it under cover for a bit too long. It was similar to the furnace at the smithery, where heat was raised by enclosing the fire, but at the same time, the flames went out completely if you covered up all the holes. Fire needed air to burn. In that sense, I may have been so scared of any water raining down on me that I inadvertently covered up all the openings.

But it was alright. I was going to blow in some wind before long. Once I had crafted an airplane, things were going to change. After all, airplanes were awesome. And flying through the sky was undoubtedly going to be fun. *It won't*

be long. Maybe five years, or ten... I'm sure it'll be soon.

And soon it was. Much sooner than I had expected.

On that day, I had been careless. I was in a good mood from completing the model airplane that I had laboriously put together myself. It was nice weather outside, and I wanted to take a look at my model under the pleasant blue sky. I laid down on the grass in the dormitory garden and took it out of my pocket. I stretched the arm holding the model towards the sky to simulate a launch. I thought to myself how strange it was that real airplanes could fly like this. My heart was bouncing. *How stupid of me to do this where everyone could see me.*

And sure enough, before I knew it Moldo and his crew had surrounded me, starting the usual routine. They asked what I was holding in my hand and laughed at me, saying there was no way that piece of metal scrap was ever going to fly. This led to a fistfight. *I'm not lucky today... Or maybe a little bit.*

Before they managed to properly beat me up, Reina appeared. Thanks to her screaming, George also interfered, stopping our fight while it was still an equal match. I had managed to get some good punches in. Looking at Moldo's swollen cheeks, I felt my bitter anger dissipate a little. Served him right for laughing at my dream.

However, considering that George wanted an explanation for our fight, maybe I wasn't lucky after all. Surely George was also going to tell me that it was impossible when I explained about the airplane. Like everyone else. Did I really have to take on another shower of ridicule? *How annoying.* Even though I was used to hearing it, I didn't like it.

Did you really need to know the reason? It was my fault. Not that I regretted it. I knew that I wasn't supposed to resort to violence. But should I have just shut up and listened to them disparaging the thing that was most important to me? Maybe. It would have been admirable if I could have done that. But I didn't want to stay silent. They could scold me all they wanted, I wasn't going to give in. This wasn't about any objective good or bad, but about my personal principles. This was what having a dream meant to me.

As I resolved myself and stayed silent, a breeze blew in from the side. Reina had approached me. "Hermes, you have to explain yourself."

Why does it matter to you? It shouldn't.

Yes, I was grateful that she had saved me, but this was about my dream. I realized that I was a weird one compared to everyone else. *So... So why do you have to look so annoyed?* I still felt a mysterious wind coming from her gaze. *Fine, I'll show you.*

I reluctantly opened the fist that tightly grasped my plane model.

"They saw this and said that it could never fly..."

There was no way I could let that slide. And I realized that I was alone in thinking that way. I already knew how everyone else was going to react. They were going to frown and say, "You fought over a petty squabble?" They were never going to understand. To protect my flame from the incoming shower, I put up with the pain and held on tight to my dream.

As I took on my defensive stance, I felt another wind approach. Unexpectedly, this one was extremely hot.

"Oh?! This is wonderful!"

The source of that wind was Ash.

Although he had watched me from a distance, he was now approaching me at such speed that he almost bumped into me. He kept saying how wonderful my model airplane was. He listened to my explanation, accepted it, and even replied enthusiastically. But there was more. While I had thought that I was the only one who experienced anger over a "petty squabble," it appeared that Ash shared my feelings.

"Hermes, I will help you achieve your dreams."

It felt as if a bellows had blown a gust of words in my direction. Words that I heard for the first time in my life.

At the same time, Ash's smile conveyed a more violent anger than I harbored myself. "Let us work together to shut up those loud people over there."

Work together. He said we should work together.

I was at a loss for words. I didn't know how to feel. I couldn't believe it. Was this real? Until now, no one had ever said anything like this to me. But Ash was

serious.

When George brought up the punishment for my fight, he put himself in front of me with such elan that even George recoiled. He protected me. *Who does something like that? Trying to stop a leader of the academy from enforcing the rules? Why is he willing to put his own reputation at risk for someone like me? This can't be real.*

But Ash did it and succeeded. He kept on talking with such vigor that eventually George just gave up on punishing me.

I was just confused at the time. But I was able to feel the hot air that Ash was blowing towards me. And it was not just for an instant. He gathered his group together—he even got Yae to join—and said the following: “So, it is decided, then! We will strive for a peaceful resolution by helping Hermes revive aeronautical technology!” he proclaimed, as if to shut up all those who had constantly belittled my dream.

While that alone would already have been a miracle, none of his friends laughed. Not Arthur, not Maika, not Reina. They acknowledged that he had said something outrageous, but they didn't deny it. This was too good to be true. No one was laughing about the concept of a machine flying through the sky. This couldn't be happening. But it was, right here. *What's wrong with these people? What's wrong with Ash?*

“It all sounds a bit off to me... Are you sure you're all alright?”

I instinctively asked them if they were alright. As soon as those words left my mouth, I realized that I wouldn't have minded even if they weren't.

“I mean, I have been talking about my own dream for a while now, so I guess me saying that I want to build an aircraft would not really surprise anyone,” Ash answered.

Ash's dream?

When I asked him about it, he replied in a smooth voice with the same smile that he always showed when I ran into him at the dormitory. He talked about bringing back the plentiful life of the ancient civilization. Even the most thickheaded person could have felt the scorching heat contained in his words.

“Aircraft are one part of it, after all. I am afraid that since they all have been dealing with another dream chaser like you for a while now, nothing will really surprise them anymore,” he said.

It felt big. It was not a thought or a perception, but a feeling. I wondered what it was—I couldn’t pinpoint it right away. That was how big it felt.

Not knowing, I tried to find out by asking some questions. “Bringing back the life of the ancient civilization?! Does that mean you want to make stuff like the machine that can produce ice? The ones that can keep the room cool in summer and produce heat without fire? Even that thing which allows you to listen to music and watch pictures wherever and how often you want?”

Yes, that was an outrageous idea. None of it existed in the present. No one had ever seen any of it. It was a ridiculous ambition to bring back all those things from the legends, which may or may not have existed. It was a ridiculously big dream. It was not normal. But he kept believing in his dream and talking about it, no matter what people said.

“Yes, including all of that, I want to be able to live a happy and fun life. That is my dream.”

No wonder I had felt something big. Since I also had a burning dream inside of me, I knew exactly what was happening. His dream was big. I was fully convinced. Of course there would have been hot air accompanying Ash’s words. Inside his chest, there was a furnace many times larger and burning much brighter than mine. What a splendid forge. With a furnace like that, you could make anything. Even legendary machines from the ancient civilization. Of course, that also included airplanes.

Unwittingly, as if it was the natural thing to do, I let out a long and painful sigh, followed by a shout. “Hahaha! You dream big! I give up! That’s quite a big dream right there!”

I was no longer able to contain my joy. I was having too much fun. It almost felt as if I had been reborn. The furnace inside my chest was hot, burning at high temperatures. The fire of my dream, which had cooled down slightly, burned once again just as hot as it did when I first saw a plane in that book.

“This is the first time I’ve met someone with a dream bigger than mine. I

really don't know what to say, Ash!"

That heat was refining one single emotion inside my furnace.

"No wonder you listened to my dream without laughing."

And that refined emotion came out in the shape of tears.



We separated ourselves into two groups: the brick research team and the plane crafting team. I was a member of the latter together with Hermes and Lady Reina.

First and foremost, we decided to visit Mr. Quid. Since I had known him for so long, I always made sure to consult him when I needed any materials.

The former peddler was now a proudly independent merchant with his own shop. It was almost unreal how much his business was booming. When his shop first opened, he gratefully informed us that his dealings had expanded to cities in other territories too.

"Ash, good to see you! What's the occasion? Do you need my help? I'll try my best!"

He had always been an amiable person, but ever since opening his shop, his service had become increasingly more pleasant and generous. He greeted all his customers, including a child like me, with a big, heartfelt smile. A professional attitude like that was sure to keep his own little castle well-guarded. The peddler who made off with the small change of the villagers was no more. Maybe this was what was meant by the saying that "Social standing makes a man."

"Yes! In fact, there is something I wanted to make, so I have come to look for the materials that I need," I answered.

As I stated my purpose, Mr. Quid's sharp eyes sparkled. "Oh! It's been a while since you've made something new... Although I've heard that you've been busy outside the city walls. Anyhow, it's been a while since you've come to me. What are you planning to make?"

While his attitude stayed as friendly as always, his eyes stared at me as if they

had found some prey. That was not the look I usually got when shopping here.

“I want to make a toy that can fly in the sky.”

It may have only been the first step towards aeronautical technology, but according to my past-life memories, it was a toy used for educational purposes as well.

“A toy? That can fly? You mean like a boomerang?”

“Well yes, something similar. I guess you could say it is a successor to the boomerang.”

“I see. As always, you’re one step ahead. I’m not sure I entirely understand.”

It appeared that I had aroused his interest and he wanted to know more details. The sight of him brimming with curiosity was a call-back to his days as a peddler. Although he could still be considered a peddler, given that he himself was actively engaging in trade with other territories.

Either way, he was drawn towards new and unusual things. Personally, I also welcomed the opportunity to pique interest in the possibility of flying, and maybe even obtain help from a variety of people.

“I will inform you once it is completed. I would love to show you,” I told him.

“Oh, thank you so much! Well then, in anticipation, let me give you a discount! I’m already looking forward to seeing it!”

He led us with a beaming face towards the storage, where he kept various materials. Since he was willing to give us a discount, I also had a bright smile on my face.

“First, we need some good quality paper or cloth. Then, soft, light wood. And finally, lacquer or something else that will act as adhesive.”

“Hmm, come this way, please. I really can’t wait to see what you’ll make!”

I planned on making the skeleton of the rubber-band-powered paper plane with wood and then fleshing it out with paper or cloth. Getting the shape right was fairly easy, but it needed the right balance and weight, as well as wings with a properly adjusted length. Still, if we managed to make it light as a whole, the measurements did not need to be too exact.

The main problem was that in this world there was no rubber. And since that was the source of power for the paper plane, it meant that there was no engine to rotate the propeller. It was the same problem that we faced when it came to making a real plane.

However, I had two backup plans. The first one was to come up with an excuse and instead make a glider without an engine. The second one was to find an alternative way of rotating the propeller no matter what.

“Can you please show us some strings that are made out of animal tendons or guts?”

I was thinking of using animal-derived materials typically used for bows and instruments as a substitute.

“I actually have some in stock from your village.”

“From Ban?”

“Yes! And maybe also Jigil.”

Jigil had become a fine hunter himself. If possible, I wanted to craft the model with materials gathered by my dear friends from my hometown.

After choosing the materials for the prototype, Hermes looked at them while pouting. “I can’t see any metal, let alone iron.”

“I mean, metal would be too heavy.”

Even a small-scale model would require a high-performance electric motor to fly if we made the skeleton out of metal. Even aluminum would have been too heavy.

“Wasn’t the real thing made of iron? Or at the very least some metal?” Hermes asked.

“As far as I am aware, not the whole plane was made of iron. For a long time, the most commonly used material was a light aluminum alloy.”

I had remembered this piece of information when my life was flashing before my eyes during the fight with Sir Werewolf.

Back in the Great War, aluminum was considered a tactical resource, as it was

the main material of the aluminum alloys used for the aircraft. It was possible to refine it from bauxite, but you needed a large electric power source. In this world without power plants, the wide circulation of aluminum as white coins was only possible thanks to the werewolves. Once refined, aluminum was a useful metal, easily processed. It was a shame that it had not been used to its full potential in this world.

“Aluminum? Yeah, that’s light, but also not very sturdy,” Hermes pointed out.

“It is indeed slightly scary to think about flying in the sky with that, right? But before the aluminum alloy, aircraft used to be made out of wood and cloth.”

At a loss for words, Hermes looked at the wood and cloth in front of me. *Yes, we’ll use these to fly.*

“Our ancestors were amazing...”

“Being the first to accomplish something really earns you respect.”

No doubt our ancestors had their own dreams, just like Hermes. And there must have also been people who ridiculed them. Nonetheless, they persevered and succeeded. That was an outstanding and undoubtedly highly-valued achievement, which was subsequently written down in books. It was preserved so that anyone with the same dream could fulfill it again, even after civilization had declined.

“The first one to succeed...”

Hermes was clenching his jaw. His look was one of admiration for the people buried in the sands of time, yet his eyes were also filled with jealousy towards those who had the honor of coming first.

“Damn, I’m jealous.”

“Yes, it is vexing. Let us do our best so that in the future others will be jealous of us.”

He had no choice but to leave the title of the first human to ever fly to someone from the ancient civilization. However, no one had yet claimed the title of the person who revived the long-lost technology of flying.

“Is that not wonderful? You can be the first person to revive a fantastic

technology stolen by the tyrant called time. I imagine there will be many people looking up at the sky and envying you in the future.”

“...That does sound good.” Hermes loosened his expression with a satisfied smile. “I guess I’ll settle for that.”

I needed to help the now fully motivated Hermes to the best of my abilities so that he could properly obtain that title.

After finishing our shopping, Hermes, Lady Reina, and I headed towards the prisoners outside the city wall. Of course, we had permission from Mrs. Rihn in her capacity as a supervisor of the academy.

Following the Sir Werewolf incident, the public perception of the prisoners had changed. They were praised for running to the farm and informing the farmers of the imminent danger. The citizens had reached the consensus that, while the prisoners had committed crimes in the past, currently they were doing earnest work and there was no need to overly ostracize them. There were even some people who casually greeted them.

“If it isn’t Ash!” Belgo, who was doing laundry at the river, rinsed the foam off his hands before standing up.

The tough-looking prisoners liked to keep things clean, and had turned into some of the tidiest people in the whole city. After receiving the soap and being able to cook to their heart’s content, they had become conscious of their hygiene. Even though their clothes were old and worn out, they were always freshly washed and clean. Even among the citizens, they had a reputation for not looking like prisoners at all. Unfortunately, their work was still as tough as always.

“Good afternoon to your friends too!” By his standards, Belgo showed himself to be very polite towards Hermes and especially towards Lady Reina, who always looked well-mannered. *How come he’s never behaved like that with me?*

“You are quite the gentleman today, Belgo,” I remarked.

“That’s ’cause you’ve brought guests along.” He laughed scornfully as if to say that he did not intend to show any courtesy towards me.

I felt a little annoyed. It was as if a cat whom I had cherished suddenly showed affection towards someone else. Only in this case, the cat was a tough-looking, middle-aged man, so the level of my annoyance was about nine digits after the decimal point.

“So, do you need anything?” Belgo asked.

“Yes, we need some help with woodwork.”

“You’re gonna do something funny again?” Belgo laughed as he called out in a deep voice for another prisoner called Am.

Am used to be a woodworker. He was born as the fourth son into the house of a craftsman, where he trained under his father alongside his brothers. However, the eldest son inherited the workshop, and all the apprentice positions were filled up by the other siblings, so he was the only one left out. With nowhere to go, he left the house, looking for work in various villages and cities, but to no avail. When he could no longer bear the hunger, he resorted to stealing, which led to his present situation as a prisoner.

Am had told me his story while repairing my bow. Apparently, there were many third or fourth sons of artisans in a similar situation among the prisoners. Since they had never experienced any hunger during their childhoods, they were mostly arrested for minor offenses such as stealing food. Those who did not know any boundaries and committed serious crimes were instantly sentenced to death. Regardless, the prisoners here were a skilled group of people ready to help me whenever I needed them!

When I asked Am if he was willing to display his woodworking abilities, the former carpenter apprentice happily agreed. “If I can be of any help to you, sure! Tell me what I need to do!”

While Am had been denied a life as a carpenter due to his family circumstances, he still loved the craft. In that regard, he was just like many of the other prisoners who had a strong artisan’s temperament. This may have been one of the reasons why they enjoyed cooking so much.

Without further delay, I showed him the book that I had brought from the temple and explained to him what an aircraft was. I also displayed the blueprints for the model plane that I had put down in my research notes. With

that information, I requested him to craft the skeleton frame made out of wood.

“Haha! This’ll fly? Hahaha! Really? That’s quite something.” Am was full of admiration.

“This propeller and the shape of the wings are quite difficult to make. Even the slightest mistake could make the plane unable to fly. If possible, could you please make several different models?”

“I see... This is a nice challenge. It looks simple, but very pretty.”

As Am eagerly inspected the illustration of the plane, Hermes was keen to jump in. “Yeah, it’s beautiful. Even though it’s not flashy at all, you can’t get it out of your head once you’ve seen it.”

“The boy’s right. And you said this can fly? I doubt back home they got any requests as interesting as this!”

“Right? You could search the whole kingdom and we’d still be the only ones doing this!”

“Haha! That’s the spirit! Let’s get this going!”

The eyes of both Hermes and Am were sparkling. Those were no longer the eyes of a young boy and a middle-aged man, but those of two dream-chasing boys.

As they started talking about the process of making the model, Lady Reina showed a wry smile. Her expression looked less like that of a young girl and more like that of a concerned, mature woman. “I wonder if they’ll be alright. I’m a bit worried just looking at them talking themselves into a frenzy.”

“Men are like that. No matter how old they are, they always have a childish part inside of them,” I reassured her.

“Is that so?” Shortly after asking me back, she seemed to have convinced herself of the answer. “Yeah, that may just be the case.”

“Why did you just convince yourself after looking at me?”

Considering that I had memories from my past life, I felt that I was quite the calm gentleman.

Lady Reina just cleared her throat and glossed over my question. “I’ve not really been of much help so far. Are you sure I should be here?”

“This is where I will need your help now.”

I took out a protractor and ruler and handed them to the worried Lady Reina. In this world where artisans manufactured things by relying on their experience and intuition, those were rare items only used by a select few researchers. Protractors were even so scarce that I had had to make one myself with the help of the prisoners.

“I want you to compare the test model plane to the blueprints. You can use these to measure the curves of the wings and the propeller and write down the data in as much detail as possible.”

This task seemed perfect for Lady Reina, who was great at math.

“That seems difficult. Do you think I can do this?” she asked.

“You will be fine. We are not writing up a detailed book like those at the temple library. It is just a memo to keep track of what we tested so far and how it worked out. Just try it out and think of it as practice for now!”

As I handed the writing tools over to her, she showed that reassuring smile that made all the boys fall for her. “I see. In other words, I should clean up after the boys have made a mess.”

“It is very much like you to put it that way.”

“Thanks.” She smiled. “Although I’m not confident enough to say that I’ll be able to clean up after you... I’m going to leave that to Maika...” Her now mischievous gaze wandered from me towards Hermes. “This one I can manage somehow. Leave it to me!”

“I am counting on you. I will also help with the manufacturing, so if you have any doubts about the format, feel free to ask.”

“Will do. At the start there will probably be a lot of things I don’t know.”

In preparation, she started inspecting the writing tools. After examining the protractor and the ruler for a while, she seemed to come to a realization and turned her face towards me.

“I just realized that I also want to see the machine flying in the sky.”

Lady Reina had a look on her face as if she had discovered a new flower blossoming in the garden that she always visited.

Reina's Perspective

I was writing down all the information on the model plane on a sheet of paper as requested by Ash. First, I drew a simple illustration of a plane and then I added the length of the wings, the angles, as well as the length and weight of the whole thing.

“This is difficult... I’m not sure how to measure the subtle curves of the propeller...” *I should ask Ash. He’ll know some way to do it.*

It was strange how I naturally assumed that he knew something which normally no one should have known...

I put down my pen and started thinking about the red-haired boy. Just what kind of person was he really? Although he was the son of a farmer, he knew more than the child of the count, and he was more formal and courteous than me, the daughter of a maid. In addition, he had the ingenuity to use the army academy as a shield to request the implementation of a regional-government class plan. On top of all that, he possessed the bravery to take on a werewolf in a one-on-one fight. While he looked more childish than anyone when talking about his dreams, he also seemed more mature than anyone when working on them. My head hurt just thinking about it. It was as if there were multiple lives crammed into one human.

“Reina, did you write this?” I was caught off guard by Hermes, who had taken a peek at my drawing while I was lost in thought. “That’s amazing! It looks just like the illustration in the book.”

Hermes showed a smile that could only be described as childish. His head was moving right to left and left to right as he restlessly stared at the paper. *Can’t you see the whole thing even if you don’t move your head like that?*

Compared to Ash, Hermes was easy to understand. After thinking about complicated and mysterious things, the contrast even felt slightly amusing.

“Not at all. I’m just doing what Ash told me,” I said.

“Still.” In a serious tone, but with a smile, Hermes immediately continued, cutting up my words. “I’ve read that book about planes so many times, but there were still a lot of things that I didn’t fully comprehend. Like the symbols next to the illustration... However, seeing your notes, now I can take a guess. They must have been describing the angles of the wings and their curvature. That makes sense. It’s difficult to understand with just a blueprint.” He passionately nodded along.

“Like I said, Ash told me...”

“First of all, it’s amazing that you can do it right after being told. It’s not as easy as it seems, even if you follow the instructions word by word.”

“Is that so? Arthur and Maika also always manage to do the things that Ash tells them right away.”

“Well, Arthur and Maika are the top students of this year. It’s already amazing that you can claim to be on their level!”

Hermes seemed slightly annoyed that I didn’t want to accept his praise.

I can’t just let him lecture me like this!

I glared at him to show my discontent, but Hermes didn’t notice me—he was too focused on the paper. At this point, talking with him felt just as tiring as engaging with Ash.

“What’s wrong, Reina?”

“Nothing... I think I’m starting to understand.”

Those two were birds of a feather. Trying to have a serious conversation with Hermes was going to give me a headache, just like it did with Ash. But... I didn’t dislike it.

I let out a brief sigh.

Meanwhile, it appeared that Hermes had had enough of looking at the illustration and instead changed the topic. “But yeah, Ash really is a genius. To make something like this right after he thinks it up. He really is something else. It’s almost too weird. I wonder what’s going on inside his head?”

“So you agree that he is amazing?”

Although I thought that Hermes, who had tried building a machine that could fly in the sky, was just as amazing. To me that would have been an inconceivable dream. So, naturally, I wondered just a little bit how he perceived Ash.

“Yeah, it’s even a bit frustrating how amazing he is,” he admitted.

While he said that it was frustrating, I didn’t sense any gloom in his voice. On the contrary, he almost seemed proud, as if he tried to drive away any possible darkness with a dazzling fire.

“I always frantically worked towards my dream, but it always felt like it took a lot of effort just to advance a single step. Now, thanks to Ash pushing me along, it’s like I’m running towards it on the back of a horse. Saying that meeting him was a mere breeze probably wouldn’t do it justice.” Hermes showed an innocent smile. He was enjoying the experience of being pushed by a current of wind strong enough to knock him over.

His expression surprised me. He said that Ash was like the wind to him. I wondered what Ash was to me? Asking myself, I reached the conclusion that he was like a tractive force pulling me along. In other words, that meant that I was behind him, while Hermes was in front of him, being pushed by his wind.

“That’s amazing,” I said.

“I agree—Ash is amazing.”

Yeah, but that’s not what I meant.

Resting my chin in my hand, I stared at the “amazing person.” I felt like I could manage to have this boy’s back. *I should probably do that, actually.*

After all, he was the kind of reckless boy who thought about flying in the sky with the help of an incredible wind current. If no one looked after him, he was going to end up getting hurt badly. I just couldn’t leave someone like him alone.



Itsuki's Perspective

Apparently, they were going to build a plane. I was in the middle of enjoying dinner when I heard the news. *Let me tell you what went through my mind at that moment. The correct answer is, "....."* Yes, I was speechless.

"It'll be a very simple one!"

Maika looked adorable as she tilted her head while adding more information. What a cute niece she was. Lately, as we had become more familiar with each other, she had started talking in a more informal way, which made her seem even cuter. *Wait, get a hold of yourself, Itsuki. Don't lose yourself.*

I had a feeling that if I didn't keep a clear mind, I was going to find myself faced with a horrible surprise. *Remember when you approved the agricultural development plan thinking it wouldn't amount to anything! The moment you opened the box, a monster sprung out in front of you!*

After giving myself a pep talk, I warily broached the subject. As the acting count of Sacula, I had no time to deal with sudden monsters. "A-A simple p-plane?"

My mind had already snapped! *It's fine.* This wasn't my first time experiencing this. I was going to keep on moving no matter how fatal my wound was.

"Hmm... How do I best explain it?"

Maika stopped before answering. She had stuffed her mouth with today's main dish, a pork steak with applesauce. I was glad that she showed good manners and didn't talk with a full mouth, but why was she prioritizing the food over my question? Was it normal to talk about making a plane so casually?

"Maika, don't just stop in the middle of answering a question! Even if the food is delicious!" Sitting next to Maika, Arthur chimed in with a strained smile.

"Yacoo's food is once again excellent, so I understand how you feel, but still..."

Eventually, Arthur gave up on getting a reply from Maika, who was chewing her food with puffed-out cheeks, and addressed me. "Do you want me to

explain the rest, dear brother?”

“Please, if you don’t mind.” *Arthur can explain it too? How amazing is that?*

Ash was an oddball, and Maika was just as clever as my dear sister Yuika, but I was surprised to see that Arthur was able to keep up with those two. When Arthur had arrived here, it seemed like they were someone with common sense, similar to me.

“According to Ash, the hardest part about building an airplane is manufacturing the engine that produces the power to take off into the air. I’m not yet sure what exactly this ‘engine’ is, but it sounds like something quite intricate.”

“I can’t imagine it either... Anyway, what about this ‘engine’ thing?”

“So, he’s looking for a substitute for this intricate engine and planning to make a prototype first. However, since the power output of the substitute will be quite weak, we can only really make a small-scale model that fits into a hand.”

I see... Although not really.

Well, I understood what they were saying and what they were trying to do. In short, it was similar to how you didn’t suddenly start by swinging a heavy iron sword, but first practiced with a lighter wooden one. That I understood. But they were talking about an airplane, something no one had ever seen and no one even believed was possible. How could they just suddenly come across untrodden land and shine a light in its direction? What kind of magic trick was this? In that sense, I didn’t understand what was going on. It was unfathomable to me.

“Does Ash have a message for me?” I asked.

What did he expect from me?

As I felt my legs trembling, Arthur started giggling. While their voice was at a moderate volume, it resounded bright and clear. “He said, ‘Please look forward to the result!’”

“...What?”

I let out an impulsive gasp. That was it? He didn't ask for a budget or connections. He just told me to look forward to it. No wonder Arthur laughed. And they seemed to mean it, unlike the first time we met. Back then they had put up a fake smile simply because of etiquette. Now, they were raising their voice, filling the room with childlike laughter. I felt amused too, and before I knew it, my gasp had turned into laughter. Ash really was an unfathomable guy. How entertaining!

But there was no time to be distracted. All of a sudden, I also felt the desire to see a machine fly in the sky. As a child, I had dreamt of flying like a bird. However, one day I had stopped seeing things that way. I had come to see flying as something ridiculous and absurd. But now that had changed. These kids had come along to make me realize that I was much more ridiculous and absurd myself for no longer even considering it. I hoped they were going to succeed and prove me wrong. I loved their ambition.

"Very well. Please tell Ash that I cannot wait to see the result."

"Yes, I'll make sure he hears it!"

After nodding to Arthur, who had a warm smile on their face, I put my fork into the pork steak. "Let's eat this delicious dinner before it gets cold."

I was in such a good mood that Yacoo's already great dinner tasted even better.

"Oh, but there's more, dear brother," Arthur continued.

I had a bad feeling.

"Related to the airplane, we plan on submitting an industrial development plan," they added.

"...What is that?"

"It appears to be a large-scale, long-term project that aims at eventually building a real passenger plane."

Ash *really* was an unfathomable guy...

Hermes' Perspective

I set out to cut the wings for the model plane using the wood that Ash had bought. Putting a small knife against the wood, I exerted all my strength.

At that moment, Am, who was next to me, intervened. "Stop! Not like that!"

"Not like this?"

"You won't be able to smoothly carve the wood that way. First, you need to find the right angle and then trace the edge of the knife in a gliding motion alongside it. Otherwise, it won't turn into the shape you want. Look, I'll show you." Am rested his knife against the wood and proceeded to smoothly slide it along. "It's not like you don't need any force at all, but if you use too much force it won't turn out right. Wood is a delicate material. You have to be as gentle as when you're holding a girl's hand."

"Holding a girl's hand?" I didn't know what that meant, since I had never held a girl's hand.

As I tilted my head, a smile came over Am's face. "I take it then you don't have any experience with girls yet?"

I felt like I had just been unfairly attacked.

"Yes, so what?"

"Hahaha! There's no need to be sulking."

I'm not sulking. The way you said it just rubbed me the wrong way.

Meanwhile, all the others around us had started grinning too.

"Hey, Ash. They're being weird. It's irritating."

Ash, who was carving wood next to me, had the same friendly grin as always. "Hmm... Well, in regard to most things, those who have experience feel a sense of superiority to those who are still inexperienced. Have you not felt like that before?"

"No, I don't think I have."

"Are you not happy whenever you can teach someone about airplanes?"

"Oh, I see, I think I got it now, that is a lot of fun but it's annoying being on the receiving end!" Hearing Ash's example, I understood within seconds and

reflexively started talking faster.

“I am glad you understand. That is why as their junior you should always quietly listen to them. If you look annoyed, it might end up having the opposite effect and they could start talking even more. Especially when it comes to love affairs...”

“I think I get it.” How come Ash stays so composed? Does he already have a partner? Could it be Maika? Or Reina?

By the look of things, the prisoners were asking themselves the same questions.

Meanwhile, Belgo was rubbing his chin with a bored look on his face. “You already had a partner? How boring! Not that it’s unexpected considering how Maika always...”

“No, I am single,” Ash quickly answered.

“...Huh?” Belgo let out a strange voice before stopping in his tracks. In fact, all of the prisoners stiffened.

What happened? Sure, Ash’s answer may have been a bit unexpected, but was it that shocking?

“...What about Maika?” Belgo asked.

“She is a friend. Or maybe I should say a childhood friend. Either way, there is nothing happening between us.”

“Are you serious? Oh, but I guess she is the daughter of a big shot. I almost forgot that since she’s always so friendly.” Belgo nodded in agreement.

He was right. Maika was very frank, even though she came from a noble lineage and had the second-highest social standing at the academy in our year. Since she was always playing with dirt in the dormitory’s garden, she didn’t give off that impression at all.

“I see how it is. You have to be careful given your social position. But just between you and me, what’s really going on? I won’t tell anyone,” Belgo insisted.

“Just between you and me, we really are just childhood friends.”

After hearing Ash's clear statement, Belgo gave him an annoyed look, which eventually shifted towards me. "Hey, Hermes! How do you see the situation?"

"How do I see it? I'm not sure what to say..."

Until just recently, I had barely talked to them. Although it was true that those two, or maybe even those four if you included Arthur and Reina, always stood out, so it wasn't like I didn't know them at all.

"I just know that it looks like they're getting along quite well," I concluded.

"Have you heard any rumors about them going out?"

"Not really, no. Oh, this may not be relevant, but I've heard about the boys' and girls' popularity rankings at the academy. Arthur was number one for the boys and Maika was the most popular of the girls."

Who was number two for the boys again? I knew that Reina was number two for the girls.

"Yes, I have heard about this too! That is to be expected in a place where young boys and girls gather," Ash said.

"They've really got nothing better to do."

As I voiced my exasperation, Ash forced an affirmative yet uninterested smile. "Well, enough of the chitchat—we should get to work. We do not have that much time, after all," Ash urged the noisy bunch to return back to work.

He was right. We planned on finishing before the medal ceremony.

While Ash and I tried to focus on carving the wood, the others started talking loudly among themselves.

"How come they've already withered this much at their age?"

"I don't think they're bad guys."

"They're not bad, but they're strange."

"Yeah, they really are. *Too* strange."

For some reason, I heard an extra-long sigh coming from the direction of the prisoners.

“What are they doing?” I asked Ash.

“Who knows? They must have something on their minds as our seniors with more life experience. More importantly, here is a memo for the length of the wings.”

“Oh, let me see.” I checked the information in the notebook that he held out. “Wow, those are some detailed numbers.”

“I just copied them from a book I was looking through.”

“Really? What book?”

For a moment I thought that there may have been a book at the temple that I hadn’t read, but this wasn’t the case.

“It was in the book that you used to read. Towards the end of the *Aircraft Encyclopedia*.”

“Did that have this much detailed information? I thought I had read that back to front several times...”

“The letters were fading, so maybe they were hard to see.”

“...Could be.”

I wasn’t convinced. Putting other books aside, I was shocked that I would have overlooked information in a book about airplanes. *I’ll ask Yae later if I can have another look at it.*

“Anyway, I assume you want me to confirm whether those numbers are correct,” I said.

“Yes, they might be wrong, but since we do not have many other resources, could you use them as a reference? I will try something with a different length.”

“Leave it to me!”

That was what I said, but since I had no experience with woodwork, just carving was already hard work.

“Hmm... Don’t use too much strength. Like you would hold a girl’s hand,” I muttered to myself.

A girl... Like Yae? ...Or like Reina? I imagined taking the latter’s hand and

somehow that did the trick.

After finishing the woodwork, I hurried towards the temple because I couldn't take my mind off the information that Ash had mentioned. I didn't have much time before the dormitory's curfew hit.

Once I arrived, I got permission from a priest to look at the *Aircraft Encyclopedia*, but...

"As expected, I can't find anything."

There was no information regarding the angles of inclination or length ratio of the wings. I had thought that maybe it was written in symbols or letters that I didn't understand, but I couldn't find anything of that sort either.

"I guess maybe Ash got the books mixed up, then?" I muttered.

"What are you doing here so late? It's almost curfew."

"Oh, good evening."

It was Yae who had approached me. After reflexively straightening myself, I realized that she had come at just the right time.

"Do you happen to know which airplane or aircraft-related book Ash was consulting earlier?" I asked her.

"Hm? Yes, it's the one that you have there."

"Did he look at any others?"

"Yes, there were several others. Why?"

I told her why I was there. It just didn't make sense that Ash had found some information I had never seen.

"Ah, I see. Ash must have misremembered it. That happens a lot." Yae smiled. "There have been several other instances where Ash said he found some information in a book, but when I checked it wasn't there. Ultimately, there are several cases where I still haven't found the source, but the information itself has never been wrong so far."

"Really? Well, he's very smart."

Perhaps, his mind was different from ours. It felt like he had arranged all the information he remembered and compiled it into one large reference book inside his head. Just like the notebook that he always carried around. When I took a look at it, it seemed like a bundle of knowledge, neatly collecting all his research data. It must have contained the knowledge of dozens of books. No wonder his memories were a bit jumbled up.

“In that case, where could he have seen it? Are there any books that I haven’t read yet?”

“Hermes, I know that it’s tempting, but you should leave soon if you want to get back before curfew.”

At the same time that Yae said that with a strained smile, another figure entered the reading room. As soon as they noticed us, they walked straight towards us. Their voice rang as if it was striking hot iron. “I knew you were here!”

“O-Oh, Reina, what are you doing here?”

“That’s what I want to ask you! If we don’t leave now, we’ll violate the curfew!”

Reina grabbed my hand. Although she wasn’t really holding it, but rather clutching my wrist.

“Please excuse us, Yae. I will make up for it later. Could you do us the favor of putting the book back in its place?”

“Yes, no problem. Make sure to get back in time. And stay safe!”

“Thank you!”

Reina bowed hurriedly yet politely before she started walking. Since she had clutched my wrist, I had no choice but to follow suit.

“Let’s hurry back, Hermes.”

“I-I got it. I’ll go, so you don’t have to pull me!”

“No! I’ve learned from observing Maika and Ash how to deal with types like you!”

What does that mean?

"I can't take my eyes off you and I can't let go of your hand, either! Otherwise, you'll get absorbed into something and wander off!"

I wanted to tell her that I wouldn't do that, but she was walking so fast that it was hard to talk. Reluctantly, I let out a sigh and let myself get dragged along. *See, I'm behaving myself! I'm not going anywhere!*

"Good grief, I can't believe you just suddenly disappeared on our way back and made a detour to the temple, even though it's already this late."

"I had no choice. Ash told me something that was bothering me."

"See! When I took my eyes off you and let your hand go, that's what happened!"

No, that's different. How do I put it... It's like...

I decided not to say anything in the end, since it appeared that I had already caused enough trouble for Reina. I was already used to getting lectured, and while Reina's words were harsh, they weren't cold.

"But, Reina..."

She glared at me as if to say, "What is it now?", but there was something I wanted her to be aware of.

"If someone sees you pulling a boy's hand, it's going to make the rounds." *You're the second most popular girl among the boys in our year, after all!*

"Whatever! It's near our curfew, so this is an emergency measure."

I knew that, but I was talking about outsiders. And even for me, being this close to Reina almost made my heart stop. Her small hand was grabbing my wrist. In comparison, my hands were bulky and stiff from all the smithing. They were nowhere near as soft as hers.

Hm... Just like holding this hand...

I felt like I was going to be able to carve the wood smoothly tomorrow.

The model plane using a twisted animal tendon to power the propeller had

started to come into shape. The legend that had had its wings folded for a long time was about to spread them again. Inside, I was running wild with excitement. And I wasn't alone. Am and all the other craftsmen who had helped were in high spirits.

"Finally, it's time."

"It took quite long, did it not?"

"In terms of calendar days, it was in the blink of an eye, but it definitely took a lot of effort."

We were sharing our impressions while standing around the small airplane on the desk inside the shack. No one could hold in their smiles or conceal the sparkling look on their faces. After all, it was so much fun to think about flying in the sky. That thought alone was all there was, but it was a tremendously pleasant one.

"It feels like something's lacking."

Suddenly, Belgo, the mediator of the craftsmen (they really were prisoners, but to me they were excellent fellow craftsmen), voiced his dissatisfaction.

Immediately, everyone noticed the reason for his comment and started feeling the same way. Including me.

Even though I had much fun until just a moment ago, now I was no longer enjoying myself. Belgo's statement made me realize that this model airplane... didn't have a single decoration.

"I've got nothing against a simple, beautiful design, but it feels like we could add a little touch to it." Am, who had spent the most time on crafting this plane, was the one to light the fire.

"Yeah, that's it!"

"It's not bad, but we can come up with something better."

"Isn't it supposed to be something unique in this world? Then we should dress it up like it too!"

The fire that Am had started spread in an instant as if the flames had reached a desolate field covered in oil.

“What should we do? Put on some color?”

“We can’t really add any intricate handiwork, so a drawing would be nice.”

“Should be a bird. It’s flying in the sky, after all.”

“Looks more like a dragonfly to me.”

Everyone was exchanging their opinions with their neighbors and the people opposite them. Since all of them were craftsmen with strong opinions regarding their personal preferences, it quickly evolved into a heated discussion. As for me? I was in agreement with Am that a drawing would be best and kept my calm.

What did you say, Am? A swallow? Sure, they are fast, but falcons look much cooler. It should be a falcon. Let’s just go with a falcon. What? No way we’re going with a swallow! This is my plane, after all! Yes, you worked hard too, but a swallow is out of the question.

Before I knew it, the whole place was up in flames. In an attempt to be heard, everyone talked louder than the next person, happily shouting themselves into a rage with a bright red face. The whole bunch was out of control with no one here to contain us.

But we weren’t the only people hanging around this shack. Amid the tumult, the door opened. A small silhouette entered the room. They took a glance around the room, held their head, and let out a deep sigh. While covering their ears, they walked towards the stove, where they strongly banged a ladle against a clean and polished pot. And not just once. It must have been more than ten loud, consecutive blows that silenced the room.

After that, the small silhouette, Reina, glared at us with a commanding look before calmly speaking. “Everyone, be quiet!”

Her scolding, which had mixed in just a pinch of tenderness together with her anger, made each and every one of the tough-looking craftsmen embarrassingly exchange glances.

After that, everyone apologized in unison. “We’re sorry!”

It was a sight to behold, seeing these intimidating guys bow their heads to a

young girl who, if I may say so, was also quite beautiful. Of course, I also apologized with everyone else. I was part of the problem.

“How come it turned so rowdy during the time that I went to report to my mother?”

Fortunately, we had escaped punishment by bowing our heads.

Feeling relieved, Belgo and I, who were essentially in charge, explained the uproar.

“Ah, I see. You’re right, it wouldn’t hurt to make it look a bit nicer,” she agreed.

So Reina was of the same opinion. How reasonable of her.

“I received the news from my mother that Lord Itsuki gave permission to Maika and Ash to showcase the plane at the medal ceremony. Given the occasion, it would be great for it to look great at the unveiling,” Reina added.

“Seriously?!” Yes! That’s great news.

Seeing this model airplane, everyone should realize that machines capable of flying in the sky were real. I was no longer going to let them get away with saying that humans couldn’t fly. On the contrary, I was going to make them say that one day humans were going to soar through the skies.

Imagining their reactions, I felt the heat rising up inside of me. Ever since I began riding on Ash’s current, this feeling had been a frequent occurrence.

As I inadvertently shouted out in joy, Am, Belgo, and everyone else joined in. The volume was probably even louder than the earlier uproar.

Covering her ears, Reina let it slide with a smile.

Sorry. I know you don’t like noise, but I just couldn’t hold it in.

After shouting for a while, we returned to the problem at hand. “So, what drawing should we choose?” Belgo broached the subject with an expression as if he was ready to fight.

The presentation of the model airplane during the medal ceremony was going to be a huge event that was sure to make history. Naturally, everyone wanted

to have their name attached to it. The greedy bunch were glaring at each other. Of course, Belgo thought that his proposal was the best one. Just like I and everyone else did.

While distancing herself from the explosive situation, Reina gave us a warning. “Don’t get too noisy! And don’t resort to violence under any circumstances!”

I understood. I nodded before making sure via eye contact that everyone else was on the same page.

Reina was quite scary after an argument. Making her angry created a ripple effect that influenced our meals. For example, the other day during dinner at the dormitory, all the side dishes disappeared. For a moment, I didn’t understand what was happening. When I then complained about the incident to Belgo, he informed me that their food supplies had also been reduced. He clung to Ash in tears, but the latter rejected him saying, “That is your fault for upsetting Reina.” So, yes—we all knew how frightening she could be. Accordingly, we exchanged our strong opinions quietly and without any violence.

“I think a swallow would be nice.”

“Swallows are weak. Let’s make it a falcon.”

“Are you sure it can’t be a dragonfly?”

“A butterfly wouldn’t be bad as a design either.”

There was no end in sight. For a while we tried staring each other down with deadly looks, but we were unable to reach an agreement. No one was ready to compromise. *It’s still my plane.*

“Hey, Reina,” I called to her.

“Huh? Yes?”

She had been paying attention. Sitting on a chair and resting her chin in her hands, Reina looked surprised when her name was called.

“You’ve been listening, right? Which idea do you like best?”

“Me? Hmm... Let’s see...”

After tilting her head and thinking for a while, she walked towards the table where she had put her luggage. She took out one of several blueprints and rolled it out in front of everyone. It was the blueprint of an early prototype. She pointed at its wings.

“I think this looks good,” she simply said.

There was a single bird feather drawn on the wings. It seemed like metal with flames on its contours.

“What is it?”

“It’s the feather of a phoenix.”

A phoenix. I had heard a little bit about this old legend before. It was the name of a godlike bird that revived every time it died.

When I asked Reina if that was what she meant, she praised me with a smile on her face. “So you know about it. I only recently learned about it from Ash.”

The phoenix was a strange bird that came back to life inside the flames. No matter if it died of old age or if it was killed, when its corpse came in contact with fire, it rose again from the ashes. It was an immortal bird that kept reviving.

“Ash said, ‘The airplane crashed from the sky and turned into an old legend from the past. But we can resurrect it by gathering the fire of everyone’s dreams. And since this is the first step in reviving the legend, I drew a single feather from the legendary bird.’”

Apparently, Ash had drawn the feather on the wings as a little prank while he was teaching Reina how to sketch the blueprints.

“That’s not fair, Ash,” I involuntarily voiced my frustration.

Belgo and Am no longer had anything to add. There was no better symbol than this. And thus, the name of our airplane was decided.

“Phoenix Feather.”

For now, the flames of our dreams were still only able to resurrect a single feather, but this was our first step.



The award ceremony for those involved in the werewolf fight took place at the public square of Itsutsu city. It was a small festival. While there had only been a single demon, the fact that, excluding me, no casualties had occurred was worthy of celebration. It also had the additional purpose of revitalizing the economy of the city, which had stagnated after the news of demons roaming in the vicinity. In other words, the celebration of the heroes who defended the city was a sort of pretext to revitalize the city.

About fifty regional troops stood at the public square forming a line. Besides those who had fought the werewolf, there were also many soldiers that had been recruited as stooges to make the ceremony livelier. The students of the army academy had been placed slightly to the side of those soldiers. Since I was one of the people awarded with a medal, the rest of the students had been caught up in the whole spectacle. I truly felt sorry for them. If that was me, I would have pulled a wry face, cursing whoever put me in this situation. *Please accept my deepest apologies.* Fortunately, those who were busy or did not feel well were readily excused from attending. As such, Lord Arthur, Lady Reina, and Lady Maika did not stand in the line.

The ceremony itself was quite long. Atop the stage that had been built on the square for the occasion, Lord Itsuki was giving an account of the demon's attack and the ensuing combat, while praising the soldiers' response. I had assumed that the endless blabber of people in high positions was equally despised in any world, but it turned out that the crowd actually enjoyed it. *Are you all really that starved for entertainment?*

"Let us move on then to the awarding of the medals. Please step forwards when I call out your name."

The medals were awarded in order of merits, starting with the white medal, followed by iron, then copper, and finally silver. Sir George, the gunner who had delivered the finishing blow with the ballista, and the commander in charge of the gate were all awarded the copper medal. Was it really okay for me to receive the silver medal, the highest honor of the day?

"And finally, Ash, student at the army academy!"

After I replied and started walking towards the stage, the crowd broke out into applause. *Please stop, this is embarrassing.*

I liked receiving praise, but I did not like standing out. As a farm boy from a remote village, I did not have any tolerance in that regard. Be that as it may, I could not just hide my face and run away. Going there with a cold and blank expression was not an option either—I would have felt bad for Lord Itsuki—so I climbed up the stage with a forced smile on my face. Luckily, Lord Itsuki seemed to interpret my behavior favorably.

“As expected, you keep your calm. You have strong nerves considering your age. I can see how you managed to take on the werewolf alone and survive.”

“I am honored by your words.” *Hurry up and give me the medal so I can get off the stage already.*

“I applaud your outstanding success and your noble will to defend this city in a hard-fought battle, even though you have not been officially appointed to any position yet. In the name of the Count of Sacula, I will hereby confer on you the first-class silver medal of battle bravery.”

“Thank you. I am humbled to receive this medal.” *That’s enough, right? Can I be dismissed?*

“It is unprecedented in the whole history of our kingdom that a twelve-year-old receives a silver medal. I cannot help but feel proud that this honor is bestowed upon a boy from our territory.”

He was still going on. *Can you please move on already? You know we’ve got a presentation scheduled. I will never forget how you graciously and smilingly approved our proposal. So hurry up.*

“Furthermore, through your activities at the army academy, you have proven yourself to have a deeply inquisitive mind. It is also worth noting that you have been more than willing to generously share your acquired knowledge with your classmates and friends.”

He conjured up a storm of high praise, but I could sense the remains of the turmoil from the agricultural development plan still lurking underneath the thin surface layer, making it all the more embarrassing. *I’m sorry for causing you*

such trouble back then. And since I'm sure I'll cause you even more in the future, I'll send you a special telepathic apology in advance. Hopefully that'll do the trick.

"The Count of Sacula cannot wait for you to come of age and appoint you to an official position. Hopefully you will be able to grace us with your talents in the future too."

"I will do my best to live up to your expectations."

Maybe my telepathic apology had worked. I shook his hand, which he had held out with a beaming smile. At the same time, Mrs. Rihn, who presided over the ceremony, prompted the audience to clap, so as to move on with the schedule.

Now that we had drawn closer together, Lord Itsuki whispered to me, "Is everything ready?"

"Yes! ...Probably."

Lord Itsuki gave me a reproaching look and a wry smile. What did he expect? Since I was taking part in the ceremony, I could not have possibly known what those two waiting for their turn in the crowd were up to.

"I'm sure it'll be alright," I reassured him.

"Yes, we will manage."

Following a final greeting, Lord Itsuki gave me permission to leave the stage.

Oh dear. Finally, there was one more thing left to do. And to us, that was going to be the real main event.

As I was walking off the platform, I suddenly stopped in my tracks to take a look at the square. The crowd that had been focused on me until just a few moments ago now closely watched the front row. There stood Hermes, who had been exempted from the ceremony due to his important task, with the rubber-band-powered paper plane in his hand. Or maybe it would have been more precise to call it a tendon-powered model plane, considering that we had used animal guts and tendons instead of rubber bands.

Either way, Hermes had already wound up the propeller as he waited for this

historic revival.

“Fly, Phoenix!” he shouted.

Amidst the gazes of the large crowd, Hermes sent off the plane into the sky with a gentle push, as if he was a father pushing along his child.

Slowly, the propeller began to turn. Anyone who did not know about the concept of an airplane must have thought that the device was going to fall down again immediately. But that belief was crushed within three seconds.

The wings, which had been shaped through trial and error, seized the wind pulled in by the propeller. The little airplane ran straight across the sky over the public square. Always forward. It did not fall like a stone. It did not flow in the wind like the leaves of a tree either. And it also did not glide through the air like a boomerang helped by the force of the throw. The plane moved forward with its own power, flying like a bird.

Those who observed this spectacle and understood what was happening in front of their eyes let out a gasp. There were voices of surprise, admiration, delight, laughter, and excitement. But all of them only lasted mere seconds before falling silent again.

Most people had heard the word “airplane” by the time they were ten. When children saw birds, they would say that they wanted to fly too. They would ask why birds could fly but humans could not. Then, someone around them would usually explain that, long ago, there had been a machine called an “airplane” that people had used to fly. But it was only a fairy tale, a legend. Birds were able to fly because they were birds. But for humans, it was impossible.

Those were the workings of an animal that continuously dreamt but lived in reality. Even though history knew that humans could fly, humans themselves sank that history into a sea of lies. And even if someone pointed out that history to them, they just laugh it off as an optical illusion on the surface of that cold water, without even checking for the truth. Thus, the airplane, the machine that had soared through the skies, fell from the skies of history and turned into another fairy tale from the legends of the ancient civilization.

However, everything changed just a few seconds ago. People had seen an airplane fly from one end of the public square to the other with their own eyes.

All kinds of citizens with common knowledge and a good sense saw it. Soldiers that had obtained a good education and followed the rules saw it. The cultured relatives of the count who were involved in the government saw it. Their eyes had just witnessed history. They had seen the legendary airplane fly through the sky.

I wondered how many letters, how many diaries, and how many reports would include the words, “I saw a machine fly in the sky” at sunset today. The legend had emerged from the sea of lies to once again fly high in the skies of history.

Lady Reina, who had been waiting on the other side of the square, gently caught Phoenix Feather, the model airplane that had traversed the short yet historic distance of 100 meters. Only seconds after its landing, everyone present voiced their amazement. Amongst the wild, enthusiastic shouts of joy, Lady Reina and Hermes ran towards me just as I stepped off the platform. They prompted me to explain to the crowd this surprise, this historic event approved by Lord Itsuki. *Are you sure I should be doing this? I’ll gather all the attention. Shouldn’t it be Hermes, who has worked so hard towards this moment?*

I looked at Hermes in the hopes that he would take my place, but he strongly pressed me to hurry up. *Well, I guess I’ll have to do it.*

I took a deep breath. “The machine you just witnessed is the outcome of our hard work at the army academy. We decided to present it to you here today. As you may have guessed already, it is a small-scale model of an airplane!”

Once again, the crowd burst out into cheers. There must have been some people who could not hear a word of what I said but still went with the flow.

“Compared to the ones of the ancient civilization, capable of carrying people, it is quite a small plane. We still lack a lot of technology that is necessary to build a passenger plane. However, this proves that it is not impossible for humans to fly! All things considered, I dare say it is quite a big plane!”

Next to me, Hermes looked overjoyed. He was at the brink of tears, filled with happiness and pride.

I then continued. “If a passenger plane is like a bird, then our plane right here is but a single feather. Still, a bird cannot fly without its feathers. And the

person who first thought of making this single feather is my friend Hermes! Please give him a round of applause!”

As Lady Reina handed back the model airplane to Hermes, I raised his hand into the air. At that moment, the boy who had kept chasing his dream of flying through the skies was greeted with thunderous applause.

It felt like this was going to be a tale for the ages. I too became full of emotion. Emotional moments like these were what made life worthwhile. Man truly cannot live on bread alone.

Afterwards, the closing remarks of the ceremony had to be canceled, since the crowd had become too excited and fired up. I felt exhausted. I had planned for the exhibition to be a bit flashy in an attempt to facilitate the approval of the industrial improvement plan and get the necessary budget. However, things had gone too far and caused disorder, so I also felt responsible for that.

If I had to plead my case, I would have pointed out that Lord Itsuki had agreed to this performance, so it was not all on me. Lord Arthur and Mrs. Rihn had warned me, saying, “Maybe it’ll be better if you tone down the performance a little bit,” but it was not my fault alone. The responsibility lay with the person in charge who held all the decisive power. And that was not me.



Hermes' Perspective

How disgraceful of me. That was how I felt while sniffing.

Recently, I had the embarrassing tendency to cry when it came to airplane-related stuff. I had even cried in front of people once. Even now, I felt like I was about to embarrass myself by breaking into tears at any moment if I let down my guard.

I found myself at Cinnamon's Light, the home of Chef Yacoo. While we had talked about celebrating after the exhibition flight at the awards ceremony, I didn't expect it to be at this place.

The restaurant was extremely popular in the city, as you could eat great food at reasonable prices, and it was accordingly difficult to get a reservation. Since today was the day of the awarding ceremony, a large crowd was to be expected. However, since the reveal of the model plane had aroused so much excitement, even more people had decided to gather here on the spur of the moment. At the back there always was an empty table reserved in case an important person decided to eat at the restaurant. Or something like that. But it appeared that that table was the one booked for us today.

"Are you sure we can sit here when it's this busy?" I hesitated to sit down in those clearly special seats and asked Yae, who had booked the table.

"Of course. It just shows how big of an achievement your model plane is. Be proud of yourself and sit down!" Yae asserted herself with great confidence before she turned her beautiful face towards the noisy guests. "Isn't that right, everyone?"

None of the guests hesitated to reply to her sudden question.

"Of course! Who'd complain about that!"

"I'm just happy I got to meet the young students who showed us something so incredible!"

"Can I buy you a drink? Or maybe a meal would be better considering your age."

“That’s a good idea. Let me get you something too! It’s been a while since I was this excited!”

I was inundated with encouraging words and warm smiles. On top of that, food that had been ordered and passed on as a treat by other guests kept piling up on our table.

Yae, who appeared to be slightly taken aback by the overly positive response, once again smiled at me. “You see how much you’ve achieved? This is the outcome of your years-long efforts. You can be proud of yourself.”

I was on the verge of tears hearing Yae, who had supported me throughout the years, praising me and saying I should be proud of myself. She didn’t say anything when I hung my head in an attempt to contain the emotions welling up inside of me.

“I will be right back,” she said. “I’m going to let the staff know that Ash and the others will be late. Reina, I’m counting on you.”

Yae really was mature. I was glad that she was so considerate of me, but at the same time, it also meant that I had missed my chance to say thanks.

Reina took her place next to me. “I can’t believe there are this many people making merry.”

This restaurant was always bustling with people enjoying their delicious meals, but not this noisily. It was almost as if it was a different place today. I imagined that was what Reina wanted to say.

“I heard from my mother that Lord Itsuki is also very satisfied, or maybe excited would be a better word. Maybe he splurged and doubled the celebratory spirits for Ash, Belgo, and the others. Hehe, Ash won’t be able to carry it back all by himself.” Reina laughed out loud. “Everyone’s impressed. On the way here and even in the restaurant your plane is all the talk.” She spoke in a voice as clear as a perfect blue sky carrying a plane. “So you don’t have to hang your head. It doesn’t suit someone who did something as amazing as you just did. Be proud. You can even cry. There’s no shame in it.”

You see, that’s not the problem.

I was quite proud of myself. However, no matter how nicely I was treated or

how happy I was, I just couldn't bring myself to be upfront about my feelings. And I especially didn't want one of the popular girls at the academy to see my ugly crying face.

"I guess it can't be helped." She sounded as if she understood what was going on in my mind and handed me a handkerchief. "This is the second time that I've lent you a handkerchief."

Yeah, I haven't forgotten. How could I forget about that time after my fight with Moldo and his gang, when Ash told me about his dream and promised to help me with mine? It was all thanks to you.

As the daughter of the dorm supervisor, Reina acted like a small supervisor herself. She got involved in quarrels all over the place, even at the risk of ending up in scary or unpleasant situations. As such, she had also ended up saving me. That was how it all started. It was because of her intervention that I got to speak to Ash, Maika, and Arthur.

That was why, after being handed the handkerchief, I was able to say what I hadn't been able to say to Yae.

"Thanks."

I wondered how often I was going to utter these words from here on out. I already knew it was going to be too much to count. I was no longer alone.

The Paper Arena

One week after the awards ceremony, Lady Maika came to my room to give a report on the progress of the brick research team. We both sat on my bed at quite a close distance. While we were both not quite of marriageable age, it would not have been strange to think that we were engaged in terms of this world. Although she may have just acted so familiar as my childhood friend, this could have led to bad rumors if someone had seen us.

“Maika, thank you for the report, but are you not sitting a bit too close?”

“Don’t worry!” She strongly asserted herself and squashed my question in an instant.

“I do not mind myself, but Arthur could come back any moment.”

“I told you not to worry about it!”

Her face was up close as she looked me straight in the eyes. Considering our age, she should have been more aware of the physical distance between boys and girls.

“You should not make a habit of getting this close to boys.”

“Don’t worry, I only do this with you!”

“I guess that is fine, then...?”

I was also slowly getting to the age where I no longer knew whether I could remain a gentleman in situations like these, but I should be alright for a few more years. Seeing how much she had matured, I gave it maybe another three years.

Lady Maika’s face turned red before my eyes, probably because I had been staring at it. That was already not very gentleman-like of me.

“Are you that worried?” she asked.

“Of course! You are a charming girl, so you need to watch out!”

She had a likable personality, she was accomplished in both the literary and military arts, she was pretty, and she came from a good family. Looking at it this way, she was ticking all the boxes.

“...Cha... Charming? D-Don’t worry! L-Like I said, I won’t do it with anyone else!”

“Yes, please refrain from it!”

“Hehe, so you don’t want me to get too close to other boys...”

Lady Maika wiggled while holding her cheeks. It was endearing, but I would have preferred if she focused on my warning rather than my compliments. Although she looked undeniably cute.

With those worries on my mind, I once again looked through the brick research team’s report.

It appeared that the Church had deemed information regarding bricks to be worthy of being stored in city libraries. This must have been due to their wide variety of practical applications and the fact that it was possible to make them with basic technology and resources. There was a lot of information available and it seemed that we could begin trials within months. The only problem was that many of the technical terms were no longer in use. I once again realized the difficulty of reviving a once-dead technology.

“We should use this as a basis when discussing with Modi,” I said.

Modi was a prisoner who had been an apprentice to a ceramic artisan. As such, he was perfect for this job. Just by telling us which clay we should use, he was already going to be a big help. It may have been a long road until being able to manufacture firebricks strong enough to build a high-temperature furnace, but just using the appropriate materials would improve the performance of cooking stoves right away.

“For the time being, I will join the brick research team.”

“Really?!”

Lady Maika suddenly leaned forward, bumping her head against mine with a thud. It hurt quite a bit, but it seemed that she did not really feel anything. Her

eyes just kept sparkling.

“Are you sure? Don’t you have to help the plane team?” she asked.

“Yes, it is fine. We have completed what can be done at the moment, and for anything beyond that, we need better technology first.”

Even if we were to build a manned airplane out of wood and cloth, we would still need some sort of motive power to make it fly. Naturally, rubber or animal tendons would not be powerful enough. We needed an internal combustion engine. Or alternatively, there was the slightly more adventurous, steampunk option of developing an extra-high performance steam engine. Either way, the required metal technology was not there yet. The goal of making our model plane was to boost morale and make a distant goal easier to understand. From here on out, we had to embark on a sober march through Hell with our lifted morale.

“But Quid really did take a liking to that plane.”

After the test flight, Quid strongly advocated for the mass production and sale of tendon-powered planes. Since I had introduced it as a toy, he did not see it as a research item so much as a luxury item up for sale. And yes, apart from the technology, it did not use any extremely scarce resources, so if pressed I would have to say that it was possible to sell it. However, since the technology used was something straight out of the legends, Mrs. Rihn put a stop to it.

Currently, policymakers in charge of commerce and industry as well as leaders of the commerce guild were discussing the issue at the administrative halls. It had become quite troublesome—I mean, quite the honor.

Hermes was also taking part in the talks as a developer from our team together with Lady Reina, who was there as support. They had also asked me to participate, but since I did not think my humble opinion was going to be of any benefit, I refused. Quid was well-trusted by the villagers due to our shared history, and Lord Itsuki’s bureaucrats were not really corrupt either. Putting Hermes aside, this was a good opportunity for Lady Reina to gain some experience in that area. All in all, there were many valid reasons for me to refuse other than it being troublesome.

“So yes, my schedule just opened up,” I concluded.

Or rather, I had cleared it.

“That means we can work together again! I’ll do my best!”

“Yes, let us do our best!”

Lady Maika seemed overly happy. Not that I had any objections to that.

“I won’t disappoint you! It’s been a while, after all!”

“We used to do almost everything together.”

“Exactly! That’s why it felt a bit lonely without you.”

I felt nostalgic thinking back to those times, even though it was only one or two years ago. Working in the fields, looking after the bees, and studying together—it had always been us two. Since coming to the city, my number of allies had increased, which meant that more work could be done. Therefore, I had started putting Lady Maika in charge of different teams. I may have unwittingly burdened her.

“You are the person whom I trust the most, so I may have ended up depending on you more than I should have. I apologize for that. But even more so, I want to thank you.”

As I expressed my sincere gratitude, she smiled so much that I was afraid she was going to pull a muscle. “You think I’m reliable?”

“Yes.”

“You trust me the most?”

“By a large margin.”

No one kept up with me as well as she did. She usually agreed with me and she supported me by taking care of things out of my reach. I also had a lot of faith in her abilities. Although I would have preferred if she did not scold me as much.

“Heh-heh. For you to say that, it means that I’ve grown a lot.”

“If you appreciate the praise from someone like me, I will give you as much as you like.”

“I appreciate it precisely because it is from you!”

Really? Even though I'm still a twelve-year-old?

"I mean, you're the youngest person to ever receive a silver medal. You're a hero of Noscua! The only other person who has that medal in the village is my dad!"

"Now that you mention it, he always wore it during greetings at festivals."

Until receiving it myself, I had never realized that that was a medal. By the way, Mr. Klein also had a golden one. Considering that silver was already a huge achievement, I wondered what he had done to obtain a gold medal.

"Yeah! If you wear a medal, everyone knows what a great person you are straight away! They are great for showing off at weddings too! Marrying someone with a high-ranking medal would be such an honor!"

"Oh, I see! It serves as an accessory for formal dress as well."

"If I'm going to marry someone, it's definitely going to be a person like that!"

Medals appeared to be a requirement for the ideal marriage partner for girls in this world. It acted as a sort of status symbol, similar to high income and high academic achievements. Even someone as broad-minded as Lady Maika cared about those things. Or rather, considering her social standing, that may have been the minimum requirements for any potential marriage partners of hers. While she was very friendly and sociable, she was still the offspring of an influential figure in the city. On top of that, she was gifted with both intelligence and beauty, making her a point of interest for the count's line of succession. Anyone who wanted to marry her needed to be in a position to convince those around her too. It must have been hard to find someone like that.

"I imagine your future husband will be a wonderful person."

"Of course! I especially like guys who are intelligent..."

No matter the world, girls love to talk about romance. Lady Maika frantically told me her preferences while gesturing with her hands. I was swept away by the tidal wave of words and did not really hear what exactly she was saying. It had been a while since I got to experience a girl's power like this.

"S-So, thinking about this, you just received a silver medal... so that means..."

She suddenly lowered her voice while looking around the room.

After a moment, her gaze immediately returned. Her expression had changed—she must have noticed something.

“Wait. Where is your medal, Ash?”

“Is it not on top of the desk?”

I did not have any space to display it, so I had put it on my desk... which was empty now.

“It’s not.”

“You are right, it is not there...”

That was strange. I did not carry it around and I had not used my desk either, so it should have been there still.

“Maybe it fell because of some vibration?”

I looked in the vicinity of the desk, but I could not find anything. Just to make sure, I searched the rest of the room, but still nothing. Amidst all this, Lord Arthur had come back, but they did not know where my medal had gone either. It appeared that it was still there when Lord Arthur had left the room. After that, the room had been empty until I arrived together with Lady Maika. Of course, the medal could not have just disappeared on its own. Even in this world there were not any fantasy concepts that biased against humanity. Probably. Which left us with one possible explanation.

“Someone stole it,” Lady Maika proclaimed with eyes as dark as the bottom of the valley of death on a moonless night. For some reason, she was angrier than me.

Lord Arthur also agreed with an unusually sullen look on their face. It was a stare as cold as ice that would not have melted even in Hell.

“Given the circumstances, that’s the only explanation. Especially when it comes to Ash, it’s more likely that it was stolen than him losing it.”

Did others resent me that much? But if it was indeed stolen, I already had a hunch of who did it. It was difficult for any outsiders to get into this dormitory, and when it came to people on the inside, the likeliest culprit was the person

who harassed me at every opportunity. In other words, Moldo and his gang.

“That damned Moldo...” That was the first time I heard Lady Maika curse someone like that. “Should we send them to meet their maker?” And now she had thrown in a euphemism for killing him and his friends.

Lord Arthur consented to her unsettling statement without hesitation. “The wolf god? Or the monkey god?”

“The dragon god, of course.”

Wait, you two. You shouldn't be saying stuff like that so lightly. Calm down, take a deep breath.

“Ash, you're too kind,” Lady Maika said.

“She's right. In moments like these, you have to act!”

“It was just the prank of a child!” I did not think we had to resort to execution just yet.

“That's not true! Stealing a medal is a serious crime! The medal represents the owner's honor. It's like they're trying to pick a fight by making light of your achievements!” Lady Maika protested.

I did not really mind myself. The monetary reward was safely stored away somewhere else.

“Exactly! It's also an insult to the person who awarded it if the medal is treated so carelessly! Just losing it can already lead to punishment for ruining their reputation!”

That sounded scary. But I did not think Lord Itsuki was the kind of person who cared about things like this. I was sure that if I properly explained the situation, he would laugh it off and praise me as an honest person.

“Lord Itsuki is too nice to punish me,” I said.

As I smiled, they both looked at each other.

“Arthur, we need to get the medal back and discipline Moldo.”

“I agree. As Ash's friend, a member of the academy, and someone related to the government, I can't let this slide.”

They just naturally ignored me.

“We have to get it back before the martial arts tournament in fall!” Lady Maika declared.

“You’re right. It would be bad if he showed up without it there.”

“Yeah, he’ll get noticed as the youngest recipient of the silver medal.”

“He’ll be the center of attention for sure. No surprise, given what he’s done.”

Both of them got excited and started talking about more and more irrelevant stuff. For the time being, I decided to rope in Lady Reina and Hermes, since it looked like it was going to end badly if I left our counter-strategy to these two. The best way to deal with a liquid that was too thick was to dilute it.

In addition, I needed to send a message regarding the incident to Lord Itsuki via Mrs. Rihn. Proper social etiquette required one to admit to their mistakes. Of course, that is true only when one could expect a productive reaction from their superior. If that report led to me getting a reputation of having sloppy administrative abilities, then I would have to deal with it. At the end of the day, it was me who had left the medal in a spot where it could be easily stolen. I had to be prepared to take in the appropriate criticism.

Needless to say, the thieves were probably going to be judged even more severely, but that was none of my concern. I was only going to report my blunder. I did not necessarily want Moldo and his gang to suffer because I was a little irritated. As long as the victim did not cry themselves to sleep, pranks like this did not bring any satisfaction to the instigators. It showed that they had no real power over the victim.

“I just can’t have someone who defeated a werewolf being looked down upon!” Lord Itsuki agreed with the general consensus after gulping down his wine.

“Actually, it was not me who finished off the werewolf...” I replied by stating the facts with a knife and fork in my hands.

We sat in the dining room of the count’s mansion. Today Lord Itsuki had graciously invited me to enjoy Chef Yacoo’s superb cooking. It was delicious.

“When eating, you look like a normal boy your age.” Lord Itsuki observed me with an amused look on his face while Lady Maika was grinning next to me.

“Ash has always been like this. He’s cute when he eats,” she remarked.

“Is that so?”

I mustered up a strained smile in response to his question. “People often tell me that I look like a child when eating. It is embarrassing, but I just love delicious food.”

Ultimately, leading an abundant life boiled down to eating as much delicious food as possible, in my opinion. If someone asked me what I missed most about my past life, I would have answered, “Filling my stomach with delicious food.”

“I see, I see. There will be crepes for dessert. Yacoo can’t wait for you to try them. It appears that you taught him the recipe?”

“Oh! I look forward to trying them. I cannot wait to see how he arranged the recipe. No doubt they are even more delicious when he makes them.”

“Yacoo seemed quite confident himself. He said he was going to wow you.”

Now I wanted to eat them even more knowing that Chef Yacoo had altered the recipe.

Somehow, Lady Maika and Lord Arthur seemed restless, though.

“Lord Itsuki, you’re getting off-topic.” It was Mrs. Rihn who cautioned him with a composed expression. As expected from someone as professional as her.

While Lady Reina next to her showed excitement at the mere mention of the word “crepe,” her mother did not react even in the slightest. But I imagined that on the inside she was looking forward to the crepes too. A while ago, Mrs. Rihn had asked me in a roundabout way if we were going to make them again soon. Of course, I obliged and made her a load.

“I’m sorry. Where was I? Oh yes, I can’t have Ash being looked down upon.”

“With all due respect, I am still only twelve, so it is only natural that people would not take me seriously.”

I did not have a particularly imposing presence or physical strength, either.

Accordingly, the guards at the gate always told me to take care when I walked past them.

Lord Itsuki frowned upon hearing my opinion. “You may be right, but looking down upon a person who fought a demon and received a medal also means that they are making light of the threat of demons. In fact, there has already been talk that demons aren’t very dangerous, since a child was able to take care of one.”

Mrs. Rihn went on to substantiate his claims. “It is as Lord Itsuki says. Since there are many students at the academy who have bested Ash in a match, they are growing rather impudent thinking that they could take on a werewolf without problems themselves.”

I saw their point and frowned.

In terms of fighting strength, I was in the lower-middle tier of the academy, so I understood their way of thinking. However, a werewolf was not an easy opponent. Even both top students, Glen and Lady Maika, probably would have only been able to buy some time in a one-on-one fight. I only managed to somehow hold my own because I concentrated on self-defense, landed a hit with the tear-inducing poison, and above anything had experience fighting with my life at stake.

After looking at my expression and confirming that I had understood the situation, Lord Itsuki continued. “I really can’t turn a blind eye if that train of thought is already spreading among the students. New recruits often overestimate their power and behave recklessly, but if their future commanders do the same that will only lead to tragedy.”

What he said was quite reasonable, but for some reason he was speaking in a very monotone voice. *Oh, I see.* He already had a plan and invited me to this dinner party to feel me out. That made sense. While he had called Lady Maika and Lord Arthur to dinner before, it was unusual for him to invite me along too.

“So, Ash. We have to make them understand that your strength is nothing to be looked down upon.”

I guess it has come down to this. I smiled, but could not bring myself to agree or disagree.

“At this rate, it is highly likely that young people with a promising future will have their fleeting lives come to a quick end. Besides, the population of the fief also wants to see the bravery of the youngest boy to receive the silver medal first-hand.”

This whole situation had become quite troublesome. If there was time for something like this, I could have just as well read another book. *Let's think of an alternative. Especially for my sake.*

I tried to convey my feelings with a smile while remaining silent.

Contrary to my negative self, Lady Maika leaned into the proposal. “Dear uncle, what exactly are you thinking about?”

Don't ask! He'll slowly drag you into the swamp!

“Well, I was thinking that it would only be considered natural for someone who brought down a werewolf by themselves to defeat their fellow students with ease in a duel.”

“I do not think so.”

As I threw in the towel before the duel had even started, Lord Itsuki inspected me with one eye closed. “Are you sure? Baleas said that, if you got serious, none of the students could beat you. And you know how much I value the opinion of that overly serious guy.”

“Maybe I could do it if I treated all of them to a feast for breakfast and we changed the rules so that I win all my matches by default.” In other words, it was essentially impossible.

Nonetheless, Lord Itsuki clapped his hands in delight. “Hahaha! It's as Baleas says. You're without a doubt the strongest student this year, or maybe even in the history of the academy!”

How did you reach that conclusion?!

“And I can't possibly let someone that strong restrain themselves to only fight his fellow classmates. No! Baleas... Sir George, who also proved himself against the werewolf, volunteered to be your opponent!”

...Are you seriously telling me to fight my teacher?

Sir George was as powerful as his overly serious attitude suggested. Attending his classes and observing his skills left me wondering why someone as strong as him was in charge of managing the equipment.

As I was at a loss for words, Lady Maika stood up from her seat with a grim look on her face. “I can’t allow that, dear uncle!”

As expected from my most trusted friend. She protested even before me.

“Moldo and his gang are the ones at fault! They should be the ones who get punished and have to suffer! If you’re going to make someone meet their maker, it’s them!”

I felt like her objection had gone a bit off the tracks.

“Ah, the ones you suspect stole the medal. That’s indeed another problem. Isn’t it enough to show off strength and make them know that I’ve set my eyes on them? Like I did with this dinner?”

It appeared that today’s invitation also served the purpose of letting the others know that I was close to the acting count. I had not realized that at all. I had just assumed that I was invited as Lady Maika’s plus one.

Mrs. Rihn and Lady Reina took it upon themselves to answer Lord Itsuki’s question.

“That seems unlikely. If that were enough, they would have already stopped after knowing that Ash is friends with Lord Arthur and Lady Maika.”

“My mother is right. Unfortunately, they don’t seem to get those hints.”

Hearing their advice, Lord Itsuki leaned back in his chair and let out a sigh. “That’s unfortunate. I heard that this year was full of brilliant students, but it appears that some shadows remain.”

“I would not necessarily call them shadows. It seems like a natural state of mind to me. The line between competitiveness and jealousy is paper-thin, after all,” I said.

Everyone looked at me as I defended Moldo and his gang. Why were they surprised? Sure, I was annoyed too, but I did not want to make a bigger deal out of it than it already was and waste even more precious time. I could have used

those efforts to work towards achieving my dreams.

“You’re something else. I guess that’s what they mean when they say that a dragon doesn’t roar at small birds.”

“You’re too nice, Ash.”

While Lord Itsuki seemed satisfied, Lady Maika voiced her dissatisfaction. *Rest assured that, on the inside, I’m roaring the small birds into oblivion.*

“In any case, it looks like Ash doesn’t want to punish them, so I don’t want to force anything.”

“But they can’t go unpunished!” Lady Maika protested.

“That’s true, but I was thinking it would be enough to make this crime have a bad influence on their upcoming performance review...” Lord Itsuki was about to let it slide, but he quickly changed his answer after noticing the look of disappointment on his adorable niece’s face. “No, you’re right! That’s not enough! How about you punish them at the tournament? You can teach them a lesson with the sword skills that you learned from my dear brother-in-law! If you don’t mind, I’ll rearrange the fighting order.”

The organizer just openly declared his intention to cheat. There was no way that Lady Maika would agree to—

“Hmm... Sounds good.”

She agreed instantly.

Followed by a request to have the referee judge in her favor at the end of the match.

Lord Arthur also seemed to enthusiastically support the idea, adding that they wanted her to give Moldo some good hits on their part. At this rate, it appeared increasingly likely that I was going to have to fight with Sir George, too.

My hunch was proven right almost immediately. Lady Maika, who was the only one that had opposed our duel, now grabbed my hand with a broad innocent grin on her face. “Ash, do your best in the duel with George! Let’s show them your real power!”

“Hehe... I would prefer to refrain from it...” I forced a smile as my face

twitched.

Before I could think up a plan to escape this situation, Lord Itsuki brought out his trump card. “Oh, that’s right! I almost forgot! If you agree to the duel, I will give you an additional monetary reward for your fighting bravery!”

“I think your concern is quite justified, Lord Itsuki. Let me help you dispel your worries,” I immediately replied.

His plan had worked. My desire for money was too strong. You could never have enough money, after all.

“So you will fight?”

“Yes! I fought Sir Werewolf and came back from the verge of death. I know all too well what a formidable enemy it was. I cannot stay silent knowing what futile loss could come out of someone taking on a demon unprepared.” *Yeah, just ignore what I said earlier.*

Lord Itsuki seemed happy that the situation had been resolved. And I was happy that I was going to receive money. In the end, everyone won.

“I’m glad that you’ve come to an agreement, but...” Mrs. Rihn brought back the attention to the main point of interest. “What are we going to do about Ash’s stolen medal?”

The look on Lord Itsuki’s and my face revealed that we both had completely forgotten.

While Lady Reina seemed to think about a solution, Lady Maika and Lord Arthur looked confident already.

“It’s easy to get it back, right Arthur?”

“Yes, Maika. If all goes well, no one will even notice that it was gone!”

It seemed that they already had a plan, so I was just going to leave it to them. I had to plan ahead for my duel with Sir George to make sure it was going to be a success. I already felt energized at the prospect of an additional monetary reward.

The martial arts tournament was supposed to be the main event of the city’s

autumn festival. I was going to experience it for the first time myself. Rumors of the festival had circulated in the village, and many of the villagers yearned to attend it at least once before they died. Personally, I had never cared for those rumors since I was too busy feeling despair at my poor life or later trying to improve it. To think that I was now a participant in the martial arts tournament. Life truly was strange.

My parents had also come to the city. It appeared they wanted to see their son's hour of triumph. As the autumn festival was essentially a harvest festival, work in the fields must have calmed down by now, but I was still impressed that they had made it all the way here. As it turned out, Mr. Quid had brought them along. After obtaining a monopoly on selling the tendon-powered planes, that guy was a bit too excited all the time. He had even given me a cloak to wear during the ceremony. It was a solid quilted coat, but when I inspected it closer, I noticed the design of a firebird. Or in other words, a phoenix.

To quote Mr. Quid, "You're famous for not dying even if you're killed, after all! You're like the bird that keeps rising from its ashes that Father Folke mentioned. It suits you perfectly!" Apparently, the design that I had drawn as a little jest on the wings of the Phoenix Feather had somehow become a symbol synonymous with me.

I had only brought up the phoenix as a metaphor for my wish of reviving a lost technology. But considering that my name was Ash, it was not strange that people associated me with the legendary bird that could raise from the ashes. *Still, I will die if I'm killed.*

Nevertheless, I was very pleased with the present, since I did not own many nice clothes as the son of a farmer. After attaching my medal, which had been safely returned, I went to greet my parents. My mother burst into tears, and my father's voice was shaking too. It looked like I had managed to make them proud of me.

As for how the medal had returned? All it took was to spread some rumors with the help of the study group members and Mrs. Rihn. Rumors along the lines of, "If anything ends up getting stolen at this dormitory, we will make sure to thoroughly investigate the case in the name of the count and make sure to severely punish the culprit." The thieves must have quickly realized that they

had been found out, and with the prospect of an official punishment through the application of the law, they decided to return the medal to its rightful place. *I wonder who the culprit was.*

By the way, during the army academy division of the martial arts tournament, Lady Maika showered Moldo and his gang with blows. And since the referee was also somewhat late in stopping the match, she even ended up making them cry. It was quite scary to see Lady Maika's cheerful smile while swinging her sword.

After the rest of the student's matches had ended, it was finally my turn.

"Next up, as the final presentation from the army academy, we have a special exhibition match!" The loud voice of the announcing soldier invited the cheers of the crowd that had gathered on the square. "The two contestants will be the two heroes who fought off the sudden attack of the werewolf! They will show us a real battle simulation!"

Clad in leather and cloth armor, Sir George and I entered the arena side by side. The armor used for practice matches covered up the whole body including the head. However, while our spears had blunt edges, they were still made out of iron, and as such, I was not sure if this gear would be good enough to protect us. Compared to the other members of the academy, who had fought with sticks wrapped in cloth, this was indeed a real battle simulation.

"The first contestant is the youngest person to ever receive a silver medal—Ash! Even though he is still young, he managed to hold his own in a one-on-one fight against a werewolf! Make sure to pay attention to his steady defense!"

The crowd cheered even louder as I responded with a moderately enthusiastic wave. There was a girl in the front row who almost climbed over the railing while shouting her lungs out. Taking a closer look, I realized it was Lady Maika.

"And his opponent will be Sir Baleas George! He received a copper medal for his bravery against the werewolf and is a respected figure among the regional troops!"

Sir George also waved his hand to the delight of his young female supporters.

While his face was hidden by a visor, his pretty face was famous across the city. Once again, you could hear passionate cheers coming from one person in the front row. To no one's surprise, it was Mother Yae.

“As I mentioned earlier, the duel between these two extremely talented people will be a real battle simulation. There will be no forbidden moves! They are allowed to use any tactics that they would employ in a real battle, so please look forward to a heated fight!”

After finishing our introductions, the announcer left the arena where Sir George and I were facing each other. Now we had to wait for the referee to signal the beginning of the match. However, this was a special exhibition match promoted as a real battle simulation. Before the referee had reached the middle of the arena, where we both were standing, Sir George suddenly stepped half a step forward, thrusting his spear towards my face. In an attempt to evade, I slid my foot backwards and lowered myself, so that the spear passed right over my head. I decided to fall back before Sir George could launch another attack.

The cheers of the crowd had fallen completely silent; you could not even hear a single cough. While we wore full-face helmets, there was a big enough gap for the spear to pierce through. This armor was made for sword combat, and while it did protect the eyes and nose from damage by the edge of the blade, it could not deflect a direct thrust at the face. No matter how blunt the tip of the spear was, such a direct hit could have easily led to death. Faced with this reality, the crowd had become petrified. Even now, Sir George had his spear pointed at me, ready to attack as soon as he saw an opening. But so did I.

The announcer tried to energize the frozen audience with a little commentary. “That was a dirty trick! Sir George started the match by launching a surprise attack before the referee even arrived! Usually that would be considered against the rules, but this is a real battle simulation match! As I said, there are no forbidden moves! Surprise attacks are allowed! It's the fault of the opponent for being careless! Let's see how it continues!”

Nice follow-up.

Realizing that it was going to be a dirtier match than anticipated, the audience

let out gasps of amazement, shock, and disgust all at once. Some criticized Sir George's surprise attack, but that was no problem. I had some tricks up my sleeve too.

Our weapons were the same, but Sir George had a slight advantage due to his physique. He once again took the initiative with a low sweep, followed by a double strike against my right wrist, which I had used to stop the former attack. I let go of the spear with my right hand to evade, but this weakened my grip on the weapon. Seeing that I did not counterattack, Sir George took the opportunity to launch a fierce attack. He really did not show any mercy. As I desperately continued to defend myself, I could see him slowly run out of breath.

Now it was my turn to go on the offense. At once, I took out a small bottle from a hidden pocket around my hips and threw it with a snap of my wrist. Sir George displayed a splendid reaction by trying to protect himself against the hit on the spur of the moment. Unfortunately, the purpose of this weapon was to break and scatter around its content, so it was pointless.

"What is this?! Ash blinded his opponent! Sir George didn't hold back earlier, so Ash decided to show some dirty tricks of his own!"

How rude! I showed quite a bit of mercy with this generous choice of weapon! Since it was just a duel, I had adapted the contents. It only contained sand. If I had used my special tear-inducing agent, there would have been a risk of him losing his vision permanently.

As the sand reached his eyes, he lowered his spear. This was my chance to turn the tides and win this match! I went for a hard low swing, but my attack did not go as planned. Sir George had stopped my spear by stepping on it. My hard swing backfired, as the spear slid out of my hands.

"Damn!"

As I hurriedly retreated, I noticed that only one of Sir George's eyes was filled with tears. The other eye was clearly open. He must have managed to close that one eye just in time before the sand hit him. Trying to keep me from getting back my spear, he made a move to kick it further away. This is where I saw a chance at victory. Since one of his legs was occupied, his posture was no longer

as steady, providing me an opening to charge at him. As expected, Sir George decided to counter with a spear thrust. While his reaction was fast, he did not manage to put in much power, making it a weak strike.

In comparison, I managed to use my momentum to close the gap between us and send back his spear as I grabbed it by dodging to the side. While he was bigger than me, the difference was not significant enough to ignore my counter. He quickly decided to abandon his spear. Suddenly, the tides had turned with me having a spear and Sir George being empty-handed. However, in a matter of seconds, he picked up my spear, which he had tried to kick away just moments earlier. With no time for a follow-up attack, we were back to staring at each other.

“What an amazing exchange of blows! Both of them are so serious that it makes you question whether this is really just an exhibition match! This truly is a real battle! I’m glad we asked these two to compete today!”

The cheers started back up again following the announcer’s encouragement.

So far, so good. Everything’s going to plan. Or to put it differently, this was a fixed match. I had met with Sir George in advance and we had practiced a few times in secret. It was just an exhibition match, after all. It looked like we had managed to make it look real enough to excite the crowd and meet Lord Itsuki’s expectations. However, this was as far as our arrangements went. We did not have enough time to prepare the rest of the match. Since we both had had our standout moments, it was probably alright to make the rest up on the spot.

Seeking out confirmation, I saw Sir George giving me a tiny nod. From here on out it was going to be an honest competition without any script. *Let’s do our best not to get hurt.*

In the end, I had lost fair and square. There was no way I could have won considering the difference in physique and stamina between an adult and a child. Nevertheless, since the exhibition match had the desired effect, Lord Itsuki gave both me and Sir George a monetary reward. As it was more than I had expected, I used some of it to buy presents for my parents before they returned to the village. I gave them the cloth and ironware that they had been

lacking last time when I visited. I prayed for the further development of the village.

After my parents left, the enthusiasm from the autumn festival was replaced by a cold wind slowly bringing winter to the city. It was thus late autumn when another visitor from the village arrived in the city. I showed up at the temple after receiving word from Mother Yae about the guest.

“Hello, Mother Yae. It has been getting cold outside, hasn’t it?”

“Hi, Ash. Yeah, it’s almost winter now. Make sure to take good care of yourself.”

The coat with the phoenix crest was a little ineffective against the cold wind. Since it was made out of rough fabric, the wind penetrated it easily. Precisely because of that, I imagined it was cool in summer, but I probably should have looked into getting another coat for winter.

“You said that there was a guest waiting for me. Who is it?”

After receiving the silver medal and standing out at the martial arts tournament, my face had become widely known. However, since there was not much to gain from interacting with a twelve-year-old child—and a poor peasant on top of it all—people rarely sought me out.

Anyone who would have benefited from such an interaction had already sent their children to the army academy in the first place. At most, I was greeted while walking through the city. No one went out of their way to summon me. I had no idea who it could have been, especially since they came to the temple.

Seeing my puzzled face, Mother Yae smiled quietly. “I think you will be surprised.”

“Oh? I am looking forward to it.”

“And I look forward to seeing your surprised face too.”

Cheeky Mother Yae. Laughing with a look of anticipation. I loved seeing that expression coming from a beautiful woman.

She led me to the parlor, where a surprising figure indeed awaited me.

“What are you doing here?!” It must have been the first time in my life that I

spoke in such a loud voice and with such a look of surprise on my face.

I was greeted by Father Folke, who should have been back at the village managing the church. “Haha, you look awfully surprised. It was worth having you called here without mentioning my name.”

“Of course I would be surprised!” I ran up to Father Folke and patted him to check if he was really there. “You are really here. Not a ghost, not an illusion... Could it be?! An impostor?!”

“Aren’t you exaggerating a bit too much?!”

“I just cannot believe so easily that the real Father Folke would show up here!”

Mother Yae observed us with a nostalgic look on her face, as if she associated our interaction with a heart-warming episode of her past. *I hate to disappoint you, Mother Yae, but the relationship between Father Folke and me is not the kind to watch over with a gentle smile.*

“There is no way that the real Father Folke would come to the city! He is so obsessed with his research that he would never waste any time that he could use to lock himself up and decipher the ancient language! What kind of unnatural phenomenon would bring someone like him out on a trip? Oh, did you hit your head really hard? Is that it?”

The idea of Father Folke going out of his own accord was even more fantastical than that of a werewolf made out of metal. This was a dream. An illusion. A legend.

“You stupid brat! Your mouth is as foul as ever!”

“That comeback sounded just like Father Folke! You are great at pretending to be him!”

“I’m the real one! And I do go out when I’ve things to do! Come on!”

After having had my fill of listening to his sharp tongue unbefitting of a priest, I was convinced that he was in fact the real deal. “Hm. It looks like I have to admit that you are the real one. So, what made you leave your church?”

“Come on, say ‘leave the village’ at least! I’m leaving the church all the time.”

“Yes, about once every three days.”

“That’s a lot!”

Hearing the veteran shut-in’s perception, Mother Yae covered her mouth in surprise. Going out only once every three days was unimaginable in this world.

“Let’s not sweat the small stuff. There was something important enough that convinced me to go outside.”

“Something that convinced you to go outside? Like the end of the world?”
How terrifying.

As I started to seriously guess, Father Folke knelt down to look me in the eyes. That was a rare gesture from him. He only ever put himself on the same eye level as me when having a serious talk. Normally, he was a middle-aged delinquent who liked to joke around. Seeing him serious was a rare sight that only occurred a few times a year.

“I’m going back to the capital. I will leave Noscula village before winter arrives.”

“You are leaving?”

This was news to me. We frequently sent letters back and forth to each other via Mr. Quid, and we had talked at length when I had gone back to the village a while back. Still, he had never mentioned going back to the capital, even though that was a big deal.

“I’m sorry to spring this upon you. It’s not like I was hiding it. I only received the news in a letter yesterday myself.” For some reason, Father Folke apologetically explained himself. “I thought I had to let you know right away. I told Chief Klein and came here straight afterwards... You’re the second person that I’ve told directly.”

“Wow, that is indeed very sudden... Does that mean...?”

He used to be a researcher deciphering the ancient language at the capital before his research funds were cut off due to a lack of results. This led to him reluctantly coming to Noscula village. I could only think of one reason for him to suddenly go back to the capital.

“Yes! I have been approved to continue my research in the capital! They will once again cover my expenses!”

“Oh! That is wonderful!”

The capital was much better suited for conducting research. Besides, he always told me about his many colleagues there with whom he could talk about his interests. Even though it was abrupt, it must have been an extremely happy event to him.

“Congratulations! This means you can take your research to the next step!”

“Yeah. I don’t know how to put it... but I didn’t expect you to be this happy for me.”

“Of course I am happy for you! I owe you immensely. To hear that your heart’s desire has come true... Oh wait, that would be the deciphering of the ancient language. But either way, this is a huge step forward. I should prepare something to celebrate. I will treat you to dinner tonight!”

I was thinking of making him a lavish meal including Hamburg steak and crepes.

“Thanks, Ash.”

“That’s the least I can do! Let us celebrate your triumphant return to the capital! I know some livestock farmers and someone who processes food, so I can make you a meal that will be even better than those that I made at the village!”

“No, that’s not what I mean.”

While I was focusing on what meal I could make from the ingredients available to me right now, Father Folke grabbed both my shoulders, bringing me back to reality. He looked just as serious as he was when engaging with the ancient language.

“Ash, I want you to know how enormously grateful I am for what you’ve done.”

“I appreciate the gesture, but...” It sounded like I was about to refuse a gift. “Did I do something that warrants your gratitude?”

“Yes, and no matter how often I say thank you, it will never be enough. Thanks to you, I was able to produce results worthy of official approval.”

“Ah, you mean because I pointed out that the ancient alphabet was made up of characters representing sounds and characters representing words?”

That brought back memories. It was the start of our collaborative research. Since coming to the city, I had not really been able to help him much, but we still exchanged opinions via letters.

“Yeah, that was a big help. Thanks to your hint, I was able to decipher a part of the text. I still need to compare it to other texts for verification, but that is what I will be doing at the capital.” It seemed that was not everything. He was carefully choosing his words. “Above all, I want to thank you for bringing my useless old self back on track after I had despaired at my research not going exactly as I had expected it. If it wasn’t for you, I probably would have died without achieving anything.”

When we had first met, he was indeed in bad shape. He seemed lifeless and almost reduced to a skeleton. His nickname, “the zombie priest,” fit him perfectly. In contrast, now he was a splendid, foul-mouthed priest who probably would not have died even if someone killed him.

“No doubt I died once. I was crushed by my dream and was rotting away as a corpse. And it was you, Ash, who brought me back to life.” Hearing such gentle words come from Father Folke’s lips, who was quite harsh half of the time when engaging in conversation, was somewhat embarrassing.

“Father Folke, I am glad to hear that I helped you, but I do not think I did anything out of the ordinary.”

As I played down my part to conceal my embarrassment, Father Folke expressed his eager gratitude by hugging me. “You taught me how fun my dream is. Thanks to you, I’m able to chase it so happily. I’m alive because I’m chasing my dream. That is the most extraordinary thing there is.”



The man who was only alive because of his dream, the man that had distorted his own vision because he was too focused on his dream, patted the phoenix crest on my back.

“To me and my dream, you are a real phoenix. I’m glad I got to meet you.”

What an embarrassing middle-aged priest! If you say this much, I won’t be able to contain my happiness.

Did he think that I did not have any respect for a fellow dreamer, who had survived much longer than me in this cruel world?

I did not know what to say. I felt gratitude on the inside, but if I replied to his thanks with a thank you of my own, that was only going to make the whole situation confusing. Even with past-life memories, accurately expressing one’s feelings was too difficult.

In the end, I replied by putting some vague thoughts into vague words. “Your dream is the same as mine. I pray that it will come true. May you work with all your might towards it.”

Father Folke laughed free from worry, and as usual retorted, “You too, Ash.”

Following the heart-warming encouragement, he let go of me and took a few steps backwards. We looked at each other for a while in awkward silence. I was the first one who could no longer take it.

“So, what are we going to do about this awkward mood?”

“Is that really what one would say in a situation like this?”

“What else do you want me to say? Please show me the model answer.”

“Well... I mean...”

I did not know what he was thinking, but this awkward mood only happened because he suddenly decided to pour his heart out to me. *One should plan their speeches ahead.*

“Besides, while I appreciate your gratitude, I will not stop contacting you just because you are moving to the capital.”

“Ah, yeah. You’re right. Letters will still reach me there.”

“And I will not let you forget about our contract.”

“I’ll never forget about that impactful contract either.”

Somehow, my broad grin and his wry smile were a perfect match.

“As punishment for baselessly calling him a liar, the priest Folke will grant Ash permission to borrow without restriction any book under his supervision.”

I had not put a time limit on our contract on purpose. In other words, it was an inhumane contract which he could not escape until his death.

“The contract will of course also apply in the capital. I am counting on you obtaining books that are only available there,” I said with a smile.

It was indeed extremely lucky that I could enjoy books from the library at the capital.

“I’m afraid the rules will not allow books from the capital’s temple to be lent out to a remote region like this.”

“Well, then we have to find a way around the rules. Our brains exist to be racked. In the name of our contract, please find a solution.” I had high hopes for his guileful craft. “Ah, I cannot wait for it. Once you are in the capital, it will be much easier to get my hands on the books I want. I have to splurge on your farewell gift!”

“You little devil.”

What a harsh flip-flop considering he had called me a phoenix just moments ago.

“So, after calling an innocent child like me a liar, you now call me a devil. I am terribly hurt. I feel like I am about to cry. Maybe it is time to add something to the contract?”

“How can you say that when you’re not even hurt in the slightest? You really have become as strong as a demon.” His retort was accompanied by a nostalgic look. He seemed to remember having a similar conversation when we signed our contract back in the day.

In consideration of his good memory, I decided to renounce the idea of expanding the contract. “Enough of that. How is the deciphering coming

along?”

As I took a stab at the subject that he probably wanted to talk about the most, the mood of the middle-aged priest lightened up. “Oh, you want to hear about my progress?”

Before I got the chance to tease him saying something like, “Do not pretend you do not want to talk about it yourself,” he started explaining at high speed.

“As I told you previously, I was looking for vocabulary that could be proper nouns, and there were three words that often appeared together. I assumed they represented the three gods: wolf, monkey, and dragon, which led me to corroborate it with passages from scripture.”

“That is a good approach. Did you manage to get any results?”

“More or less. It turned into a comprehensible passage. However, there are so many different kinds of symbols... And I can’t necessarily read the other parts... It’s a slow progress...”

“It is also possible that you are misreading it.”

“At the very least I’ve probably made some minor mistakes. I just have to steadily keep moving forward.”

It would have been much simpler if the symbols were only phonograms. I greatly admired his devotion.

“And when it comes to the crucial three gods—well, I’m not even sure if that’s what it is referring to—the three gods seem to have different names than now... But I’m still not too confident...”

“Is it a different way of referring to the gods? Like ‘the Great Creators’ or ‘the Alpha and the Omega’?”

“Not quite... Or maybe it is? As I said, I’m not sure. They were called ‘the Resurrectioner, He who restores life.’”

“‘The Resurrectioner’? I have indeed never heard anyone refer to the gods like that.”

There was the god of life, the god of wisdom, and the god of battle. While there were honorary titles respective to their functions, no one referred to all

three of them together as anything related to revival or resurrection. The wolf god, who governed life, was the only one somewhat related in that regard. People turned to the wolf god to ask for salvation from serious illnesses, for instance.

“Hmm... Perhaps our perception of the gods is different than what it used to be.”

According to my past-life memories, there had been gods whose functions had changed over time. Many of them had absorbed legends and powers of different gods to become even more powerful and revered. Maybe the three gods, the center of current belief, had a similar history behind them.

As I offered my opinion, both Father Folke and Mother Yae showed themselves impressed. “I see. The gods may have changed. You really have some interesting ideas.”

“I would have never imagined that, but if you asked me what someone two thousand years ago believed, I wouldn’t have any proof that all the ancient people worshiped the same gods as we do.”

These two were a bit too open-minded in regard to their belief, considering they were religious leaders. Some may have even said that they were impious. Regardless, it was also quite likely that there was a mistake in Father Folke’s current translation, so my opinion was just a hypothesis on top of a hypothesis. It was not really a productive discussion.

“It is just something that you should consider if you cannot find any mistakes. For now, there is not really any point in overthinking it.”

“You’re right. I’ll keep it in mind and come back to it once I’ve reached a dead end.” He took out a notepad out of his pocket to write down our conversation. “I’ve got to make sure to keep in contact with you, Ash. I wouldn’t want to miss hearing your invaluable opinion.”

“You do not have to mention it.”

I would have preferred if he expressed his gratitude through physical gifts. As a long-term friend, he surely knew what I wanted.

“I am looking forward to your life in the capital!”

“Why are you looking forward to it? Well, you don’t have to answer, I already know the answer.” Father Folke tapped my head with a sarcastic smile. “Although just a while ago I heard that the situation in the capital is quite turbulent. Hopefully it won’t be too rough.”

“Did something happen?”

I was curious, since I did not receive any information from or about the capital. Itsutsu city was located in a remote region of the kingdom, so a disturbance in the capital would not have much influence, but it was not irrelevant either. My future plans were tied to the city’s economy after all. I could not overlook it.

“It appears to be some dispute related to the right of succession. A royal who is ranked low in the line of succession tried to overthrow the ones above them.” However, Father Folke dismissed it, saying it was double hearsay and that it was not clear whether it was true.

“Hm. With this little information, it is not clear how cautious you should be.”

“Considering this is as far as the rumors go, it probably isn’t much cause for concern. Once a quarrel between royal family members turns really ugly, anyone can tell something’s wrong.” There was some truth to Father Folke’s optimistic point of view.

“Either way, there is nothing I can do about it as of right now. Not that I even want to do something,” I said.

“Yes, unless you want to marry the princess,” he joked.

Me? The son of a poor farmer? That really would be a fairy tale, making even the revival of the ancient civilization look realistic.

“If that ever happens, please write down my story.”

Father Folke and I both burst out into loud laughter.

Paper Is Sharper Than a Dagger

When winter came, I turned twelve. Looking at it as optimistically as possible, I had passed the first quarter of my life, considering the state of this world's hygiene and medical care. Maybe even a third already, taking into consideration my own guess at the average life expectancy. That meant I was left with roughly twenty or thirty years to chase after my dreams. I had to use my remaining time wisely and overwork myself as efficiently as possible while also making sure to stay healthy.

As a first dash towards my dreams as a twelve-year-old, I was helping the acting count with his duties. I was in charge of processing the yearly reports from all the different villages within the territory. It was the same task that had kept Lord Itsuki so busy last year, and it was said to be such a tough task that it shortened the lifespan of the count. The pile of documents in front of me was already enough to make anyone regret taking on this task. Looking around the place, it appeared that I had been given the same amount of paperwork than all the other official civil service employees. How did that happen even though I had just signed up as a helper?

Lord Arthur, who had come along when I asked them to help, forced a smile as I let out a sigh next to them. "After you helped manage the equipment last year, everyone's been talking about you here at the administrative halls. I've heard multiple times people saying that if you can take care of the storage, you are equally qualified to help with the work here," they said.

"Who did you hear that from? The maids and butlers?"

"No, I heard it from my brother Itsuki."

So the acting count was the culprit, huh?

The other project members had also been recruited for different tasks. Lord Itsuki had requested for Lady Maika to be his personal assistant. He must have wanted his beloved niece by his side as comfort to his harsh work. Lady Reina, who was likely going to be in charge of these tasks in the future, helped under

the supervision of her mother. Her team partner, Hermes, was also working here at the administrative halls.

In addition, some of the study group members, like Glen, had volunteered to help organize the military equipment, just like I had done the previous year. Starting this year, the task was split up into four sessions throughout the year, according to my plan. Moreover, Sir George was more than willing to accept students as trainees.

“I am flattered that he thinks so highly of me, but I am not used to this kind of work, so I feel a bit anxious when I get entrusted with this much at once,” I said.

“You feel anxious too?”

“...Arthur?” *Do you think of me as an inconsiderate, selfish boy who can't read the room?*

As I frowned at Arthur, I was met with a cheerful smile. Apparently, they enjoyed teasing me. Seeing that expression, I just could not stay mad. I imagined it was the influence of Mrs. Yuika leading me around by the nose. My first crush had the special lingering effect of making me weak to that particular expression coming from the opposite sex.

“There are still a lot of things that I have never done. And even I am reluctant to do those.”

“Hehe, naturally. I mean, you're still the same age as me.” Then Lord Arthur inclined their head, a smile still on their face. “But you never show it. You just keep on moving forward. Makes it seem like you're never worried or hesitant.”

“In reality, I always meticulously research and make plans before I act.”

“I see... But a lot of people don't even get to that stage of research and making plans.”

Research did require a lot of time and effort. It was not like I moved around without ever getting tired or feeling burned out. I got quite irritated and felt like bursting out in anger when I did not find specific sources or had to explain things that were considered common knowledge in my past life. So, it was not like I did not feel anything.

“I am so thankful for everyone who always helps me. I feel a lot of responsibility towards them. Of course, that includes you too, Arthur.”

“You’re welcome... I’m glad to hear you say so, but you don’t have to mention it. I’m helping you because I’m enjoying myself.”

Lord Arthur’s bashful expression looked a bit more intimate than usual. It reminded me that, at the end of the day, they were still a young girl beneath the face of their public character.

“But then, how come you manage to do this much? I’d love to know for future reference,” they asked.

“That is a difficult question.”

I had not even thought about it myself. When I was younger, I was full of despair and apathy. I probably could have given the zombie priest a run for his money. In other words, it was not like my ambition was naturally higher than that of other people. Yet I did not succumb to laziness and fatigue—I kept moving all over the place. I wondered why that was.

It must have been because I had past-life memories of what could be achieved one day in the future. Since I did not see the ancient civilization as a mere legend, it was easier for me to get motivated. However, this was not something I could explain to others. I had not come across anyone else with past-life memories. Not in the village and not here in the city either. It was safer to come up with another reason.

It also came to my mind that I was not sure if I could have survived without chasing my dreams, considering the harshness of this world. I felt like I could get behind that reasoning. Reading books and getting absorbed in their stories was still an important aspect of my life. *Yeah, let’s explain it like this.*

“If I stand still, there is only pain and suffering. And if it is going to hurt no matter whether I do something or not, would you not agree that in that case it would be better to work towards a better future, so that I can have some hope moving forward?” Then, I tried wording it a bit more stylishly. “In other words, chasing my dreams generates the hope that I need to live.”

Lord Arthur blanked at me.

Oh, I did it again. I missed the mark.

I was overcome with embarrassment. Why did I have the tendency to act like a dandy even though it did not suit me at all? I always ended up regretting it, yet I never learned from my mistakes. I was dying of embarrassment.

As my confidence was slowly fading away, Lord Arthur finally reacted. “Hope? Why do you need hope?”

Did they not want me to have hope? Maybe Lord Arthur was the devil or something?

Noticing my astonishment, they quickly corrected themselves. “Ah, I-I’m sorry. I didn’t mean it like that. I was just wondering if there’s still a point for hope at this stage... Ah, no, that sounds bad too...” Lord Arthur desperately looked for the right words until they clapped their hands. “That’s it! I thought that, since you are always so forward-looking, you never felt hopeless.”

I felt bad since they had gone through the trouble of correcting themselves, but it still did not sound too comforting.

“I am still a normal human made of flesh and blood, so I do despair quite frequently.”

For example, whenever an essential part of a book that I had been searching for a while was missing or illegible. It felt like the end of the world.

“I see...”

Lord Arthur looked at me with the surprised expression of a child who had just discovered that cute mascot characters are actually middle-aged men in disguise. Although they were still a child, so I did not mind.

“Anyway, just think of it as me running towards my dreams as fast as I can to escape that despair. I desperately want to live, after all.”

“You’re desperate? I’ve never seen you like that, but that would explain why you keep starting new projects.”

“Yes, it would.”

Let’s make sure it stays that way. Time to get back to work.

The yearly reports primarily covered the production output of each village and city within the territory. At the current level of development, most of that output came from agricultural production, with a few exceptions of reports on livestock and processed goods. These reports set the region's budget for the year, as they decided the amount of taxes to be collected from each village and city. It was laborious work, but since the region's budget also influenced the budget for my projects, I could not afford to not feel motivated.

"However, I think just checking whether the production output has increased or decreased compared to the previous year could lead to problems..."

The reports only included this year's yield, which I was supposed to compare to the previous year and look for any fluctuations. The amount of taxes was fixed by convention. If last year's yield had produced one hundred units, one hundred coins were collected in taxes, and if this year's harvest amounted to eighty, so did the tax.

Lord Arthur seemed puzzled by my statement. "You think so? I can't think of any problems myself... I've heard that the method is the same everywhere."

"Yeah, but if you only compare it to the previous year, you cannot really see any big problems. Maybe it would be better to say that this method makes it harder to detect issues. For example, it is not unusual for a yield that increased in the past year to in fact be on the decline when looked at the trend over the past few decades. The total output could very well only be half of what it was fifty years ago. Like fish hauls, for instance."

"Over the past few decades? Could there be such big discrepancies?"

"Yes, definitely. Since the soil is used every year, over time it loses the nutrients necessary to grow crops. That is why there are farming methods trying to slow that process down by rotating crops."

All resources were finite. Some of them may have appeared inexhaustible at first glance, but they still had a limit when taking a closer look. Even the sun was bound to die one day.

"If you look at the bigger picture, it is easier to notice such problems. Conversely, if the yield appears to increase steadily, there may be positive reasons for its growth, which may be worth examining."

“I feel like I understand what you’re trying to say, but can we do that?”

I remembered it being common practice in my past life, so it was possible. Line graphs were perfect to summarize this kind of information. The data of recent past years should still be somewhere inside this building, and anything older should be at the temple library. Thinking about it, I realized how familiar I had become with the city after living here for a year.

“How about we only check for areas where there was a big change compared to last year for now? Collecting the data from three locations should be doable, anything more might be difficult.”

“Thank the gods. I was already worried you were going to say we should check everything.” Lord Arthur let out a big sigh of relief. I mean, even I did not want to make this hell any hotter than it already was. At least for now.

“I would love to check the data from every region eventually, though. We could optimize tax collection and as a result increase the revenue.”

If taxes increased, so did the budget. And if the budget increased, it would be easier for us to ask for favorable treatment of our projects, and even request more funds for the temple library. As such, I wanted to complete this task as thoroughly as possible. Unfortunately, all resources were finite, including manpower and time. It frustrated me, but I could not complete this task before my time budget ran out.

“If only I had started laying the groundwork a bit earlier...” I muttered.

“I don’t think anyone would’ve been able to keep up with you. You were already going so fast working here and there all year round.”

“Hm, you may be right. Even if I wanted to do it, I already have my hands full. I will just have to admit that I was getting ahead of myself.” *Let’s make it a goal for next year instead. I wonder how much time I’ll have then.*

“The brickwork is going surprisingly smooth too. I would love to help the team, but I am completely caught up here in the region’s finances. I wish I could make a copy of myself.”

“A second Ash? That sounds like it would cause a stir...” Lord Arthur started showing a smile, but decided otherwise halfway through. For some reason, they

lowered their voice and said, “In that case, we’ll need to duplicate Maika too.”

“Yes, that would be great. If there were another Maika, no one could stop us.”

“Otherwise, the balance would be upset. I’m not yet capable enough to fill that role.” Lord Arthur pressed down their lips and murmured, “I wish I was.”

After reassuring them that they were a great help, they showed me a strained smile. “The role I meant is a bit different from the one you’re thinking of. Anyway, you said the bricks are coming along better than expected?”

“Yes, I did not expect the stonemasons to be this forthcoming.”

“Ah, I see what you mean.”

In this world where brick production had gone extinct, the craft closest to it was stonemasonry. Therefore, that was where I decided to seek advice. I had been worried that the craftsmen were going to reject my plans of reintroducing bricks, a material that did not currently exist, but that didn’t happen.

It should be noted that stonemasons were high-income earners. Stones were a valuable, high-class resource managed by the royal family. Accordingly, the stonemasons were in close contact with the upper classes, who contracted them to build or repair city walls and official buildings of the different feudal domains. Naturally, this led to the stonemasons paying attention to etiquette and considering themselves as part of the elite.

I had feared that bringing a strange novelty material to proud people like them would not go anywhere. However, when I showed them the prototype bricks and explained to them what they were, they immediately got interested. They were so enthusiastic that they even let out a war cry when I showed them the adhesive cement made out of slaked lime, as well as the stacking patterns from the reference books.

Currently, the stonemasons were merrily—or maybe even zealously—investigating facilities for which they could use the prototype bricks.

“I expected them to push back at least a little bit, telling me that they did not train to become stonemasons to handle this strange new thing.”

I had imagined them to be obstinate craftsmen handling luxury items. After all, their trade was acknowledged by the honorable and prideful upper-class. I thought that they preserved traditions and their way of life conservatively, since those were an integral part of their craft. However, it appeared not to be the case in this world.

As I tilted my head to the side, Lord Arthur answered my doubts. “If this were the capital, I’m sure it would have provoked the reaction you just described.”

“Do you think so?”

“Yeah, a lot of the artisans I met there were like that. In the capital, it was commonly assumed that renowned workshops made the best products. Any new place was treated as if it didn’t exist.”

In other words, stonemasons had built high-grade brands for themselves. On the one hand, that meant that there was a constant production of high-quality stones. That was a positive. On the other hand, it was difficult for new technology to get a foot in the door. That was a problem. Judging from the worried look on Lord Arthur’s face, it appeared that the capital was filled with corrupt practices.

“I used to accept it as the norm when I lived there. But since coming here and learning from you, I’ve started to seriously doubt the atmosphere back there. In the capital, we wouldn’t have been able to experiment with the manure to make compost, and probably wouldn’t have received the approval for the exhibition flight of our tendon-powered plane either.” Lord Arthur pouted while voicing the dissatisfaction with their home city. Their angry face was beautiful too, but they looked even more charming when smiling.

I made an attempt to lighten the mood. “What about eating tomatoes?”

“Of course not!”

While the tomato had gone through its first phase of testing, it was still not officially deemed safe for consumption. However, Lord Arthur had caved to their curiosity and stealthily ate them. Their reaction when eating one was the same charming, childlike smile that they were showing now.

As I reciprocated their smile, they became flustered. “A-Ah... Uhm... I-I mean,

the capital is not very welcoming to new things, so in a way your concerns weren't unfounded."

The obvious attempt to hide their embarrassment by clearing their throat was adorable.

Then, Lord Arthur continued. "I'm sure everything is going according to plan because we are in such a remote region. This may not be appropriate to say right here, but most people living in the capital and the central regions do not venture out to the more dangerous outer regions. This leaves only those with special circumstances and low social ranking living here. They are people looking for a new life, who have the guts to step towards the unknown."

"I see. They're adventurers."

I imagined there were a lot of people brimming with curiosity who loved novel things. As such, this place was perfect for Lord Arthur, who also brimmed with curiosity even though they often held back due to their tendency to show restraint. Naturally, they were also going to take a liking to the forbidden tomato.

"In that case, it is great that you were able to come here," I said.

"Yeah, I think so too. After coming here, I realized that I feel revolted by those people who want to stay inside their own little world."

No doubt the reasons for Lord Arthur to pretend to be a boy were related to the royal capital. There was not an ounce of brightness in their voice when talking about the place. Something horrible must have happened back there.

I should probably change the subject.

As an aspiring gentleman, I had to make an effort to hone my conversation skills.

"You are quite the adventurer yourself. You are the type who wants to see the outside," I remarked.

"You think so? Do I look like that?" Lord Arthur replied cheerfully after hearing my comment.

"Yes, very much so. By the way, today for lunch they will be baking pizza

outside the city walls.”

Although Lord Arthur was forbidden from interacting with the prisoners, they showed serious interest in this valuable information from outside the wall.

“Is there some for me too?”

Of course, there is. But I had not expected them to express their desire to join this fast.

“See? You *are* an adventurer.”

“Haha, this would also have been impossible back at the capital. I’m really glad I came here.”

While this was a remote region, that did not mean that everything was bad. I wanted to thank the gods for all the positives about my hometown that I had not noticed until now. *Maybe I’ll squeeze in a prayer next time I go borrow a book from the temple.*

“But before we go, there is something I want to check,” I said.

Which region’s reports showed the most fluctuation? It was probably best to ask one of my reliable seniors for help before going off on my own. I decided to ask the only other person who was with us in the room. She was not a helper like us, but a professional maid.

“Renge, can I ask you something?”

“Y-Yes?”

My senior, to whom I owed a great debt since last summer, turned around like a quivering, small animal that had just been spooked.

Renge’s Perspective

I first met Ash last year in summer. It was two years after I had graduated from the military academy and finally finished my apprenticeship to become a fully-fledged maid.

Two students from the academy came to the administrative halls to “prepare for their future.” One of them was Ash. All the senior maids praised their

enthusiasm. If they had come during the busy period in winter, they would have been met with sullen faces, but luckily for them, summer wasn't too busy. Nonetheless, since two children of the count's family attended the academy, it was busier than usual.

"It is a pleasure to meet you. My name is Ash. I am sorry to trouble you with even more work at such a busy time, but I look forward to working with you."

I opened my eyes wide at the well-mannered greeting from the boy. He looked very mature and probably more reliable than me, someone who had just been hired as a maid after graduating from the academy.

"So that's the boy everyone's been gossiping about," Ms. Azami murmured next to me.

"What gossip?" I asked.

"I'm sure you've heard about how Sir George's inspection of the equipment went extremely well."

Come to think of it, I remembered hearing Mrs. Kikyo and Ms. Azami talk about that.

After I nodded, Ms. Azami once again looked at the red-haired boy, who had just received the documents detailing his duties as a helper from Mrs. Kikyo.

"Everyone's been saying how Sir George's job went so smoothly because of a red-haired boy that helped him."

"Really?"

"Yes."

I had heard my seniors talk about how the winter management of the equipment was considered to be hell. And hearing that come from a maid meant that it must have rivaled the winter administration hell. Or to put it differently, it must have meant that people working there suddenly let out cries and just fell over, totally exhausted and burned out. And apparently, that boy who had just enrolled at the academy was able to keep up with such work.

"Th-That's amazing for such a young and quiet boy," I murmured.

"Oh? You sound like your seniors now, Renge."

I was the youngest maid, so Ms. Azami liked to tease me.

“I-I’m sorry, I-I didn’t mean to be rude.”

“Don’t worry, I’m sure no one minds. You are older than him, after all. Just be confident. How about you look after him? You’re close in age too, Ms. Renge!”

Ms. Azami’s teasing voice was a bit too loud. As a result, both Mrs. Kikyo and the boy looked this way.

“That’s right, Renge might be suited for this job,” Mrs. Kikyo said.

What?

“I agree!” Ms. Azami added.

Wait!

“It’s decided, then. Ash, the girl with the long bangs is Renge. She only just started out as a maid, but she is a good girl who is very serious and reliable. If you have any questions regarding your tasks, please ask her.”

“Got it, Kikyo.”

While I was preoccupied with being flustered, everything had been decided for me.

The red-haired boy, Ash, approached me with a smile. “It is a pleasure to meet you, Renge. Do all the other maids call you Ms. Renge? Should I adhere to that too?”

“Ah, n-n-no! Th-Th-That’s f-f-fine.”

I stuttered several times in a matter of seconds. How embarrassing. Even at the best of times I was clumsy with words, but when meeting someone for the first time I became completely useless out of sheer nervousness. Besides, Ash’s smile was too bright for me. I felt my face blush to a point where I could no longer look him directly in the eyes and I frantically cast down my eyes.

As I was writhing with shame, Ms. Azami whispered in my ear, “Renge, get a hold of yourself. Ash’s a farmer boy. Don’t you think he’d make a great husband for you?”

“Eek?!”

I didn't know where that high-pitched sound that had just left my lips originated from. How disgraceful of me! *They will definitely think of me as an oddball now!*

As I crouched down with my face buried in my hands, Ash continued as if nothing had happened in a calm voice, saying, "I will start working, then."

While I stayed silent, Ms. Azami and Mrs. Kikyo voiced their surprise. I cautiously raised my head and saw through my tear-filled, blurry vision how Ash was sitting at the desk reading the documents.

Was he taking me into consideration so that I wasn't going to lose face? How was he so accomplished at such a young age? I unconsciously clenched my fists.

"Ah, Renge! I am sorry to bother you already, but could you help me with these numbers?"

"Yes? Oh, s-sure!"

After hurrying over next to Ash, he pointed at the description for the budget of the army's packed lunches.

"I understand that this total amount includes bills from several different businesses, but should it not also include detailed statements from each individual one?"

"N-No, that's fine. W-We don't go into that much detail here. B-But the amount is always confirmed with the official in charge and the companies."

"I see, thank you!"

Ash looked at me directly while thanking me. His smile was so bright. I noticed how handsome he was up close. Maintaining eye contact while speaking was already difficult for me, but someone like Ash made it even harder. He was poison for the eyes. Bad for the heart.

As I covered my face, my seniors murmured something. "He is somewhat different from my first impression of him... He might be incredibly talented..."

"He's not getting distracted at all even though there is such a cute girl next to him..."

"If the rumors are true and he really was capable of helping Sir George..."

“Yeah, maybe he could help us in winter too? I’ll put in a request with Lord Itsuki!”

They were devising a plan to gain control of the winter hell... Their secret weapon was Ash, whose murmurs while working sounded like firewood slowly burning away.

“This doesn’t seem quite right. The amount is higher than what I’ve heard from Sir George and his men.” And on he went.

Next winter, Ash did indeed join our ranks. I was a little relieved to hear that he readily agreed to the task himself. The workload here in winter was too nasty for anyone to be doing it reluctantly. It was not called “hell” for nothing... Moreover, Ash had not only dragged along Lady Maika, who had also accompanied him in summer, but Lord Arthur and Reina too.

That wording may have sounded strange, but it was correct. Lord Arthur, who worked in the same room as me together with Ash, had said himself that, “I came along because Ash invited me, but this is really draining work.” Ash had dragged along Lord Itsuki’s younger brother. Considering that they shared a room, it may not have been too far-fetched, but it was still hard to believe. The farm boy had dragged along the count’s youngest son.

“This will be a good learning experience. Especially for someone like you, knowing how to properly judge these documents will be valuable no matter your position,” Ash told Lord Arthur.

“You’re right, I can’t deny that. I’ll do my best for my future!”

They both laughed and talked in-between work. Lord Arthur’s gentle smile was just as beautiful as Ash’s. I understood why the others had given me reproachful looks when I was put in charge of these two.

“By the way, Renge.”

“Y-Yes, what is it?” I replied after having spaced out for a few moments, so my voice sounded shrill.

Ash was fixedly staring at me. “Don’t overdo yourself, Renge.”

“D-Don’t worry, I can handle this.”

Hearing my reply, Ash’s eyebrows slanted. Lord Arthur also looked as if he had realized something.

Ah! My reply just now sounded as if I was showing restraint. Unfortunately, it was a bit too late to realize that now.

“S-Sorry, I’m fine! Really!”

At moments like these, I hated my timid voice. No matter how much I said it was fine, it didn’t sound convincing. But I really was fine. I did have some worries on my mind, but those were private, and I had to put them aside while performing my duties as a maid.

I scanned through the harvest report at hand. Adele village’s yield had tragically decreased compared to last year. Although not as much, Ajole village’s yield was also down by a lot. However, the total for the latter was lower since it had fewer crops to begin with. The former was my birthplace. The other one was the village where my childhood friend still lived. Familiar faces of acquaintances popped into my mind after seeing those numbers. I imagined they were having a rough winter. My heart felt cold and heavy, as if it had turned to ice. *If only I could help them.*

The first solution I could think of was distributing stockpiled food. Every city had emergency stockpiles, but those were not meant to help out troubled villages; they were reserved for region-wide famines and sieges by large groups of demons. It was difficult to swallow, but receiving reports from all over the domain, I could understand it. It was better to guarantee the safety of ten thousand people rather than just a hundred. Yet I was not prepared to give up. *There must be something that can be done.*

Since not the whole of Sacula suffered from crop failure, the count should be prepared to allow some leeway. If I managed to play my cards correctly, maybe I could help alleviate the suffering of my hometown and my childhood friend’s town. *What could I do—*

“Renge, can I ask you something?”

“Y-Yes?” *Focus. I can’t get lost in my thoughts in the middle of work.*

“Are there any places with considerable decreases in yield compared to last year?”

“Oh yeah, these two here...”

The answer to his question lay within the reports that I had just been ruminating over. Apparently, Ash had been talking to Lord Arthur about something, but I hadn’t heard a word since I wasn’t paying attention, so I just handed over the documents.

After politely thanking me—just as he always did with everyone—Ash flipped through the pages of the documents like a seasoned maid would.

“You were right, Renge! There is a big difference this year. Arthur, let us start with these two.”

“Got it. Tell me the names and I’ll look for them.”

“Thanks. It’s Adele and Ajole village. The names sound similar.”

“The village founders may have been related. Sometimes, when villages become too big, relatives are sent to a neighboring site to build new settlements. In those cases, they chose names similar to the original village. It actually tends to happen fairly often.”

“I see. I guess with a similar name the settlers grow more easily attached to the new village too.”

As the conversation flowed along, Lord Arthur got up and left. Unable to follow them, I vacantly looked at Ash.

“Uhm... A-Ash? What is this about?”

“Do not worry. We will work without causing you any trouble.” His smile could not completely conceal his concern for my absent-minded self.

“N-No, I don’t mind that at all!”

“I was discussing with Arthur about researching spots with big fluctuations in yield. If we can find out their circumstances and investigate the reasons behind their decrease in production, we may be able to help them rehabilitate next year,” Ash explained with a smile on his face.

“Th-That’s wonderful!” This was my chance to help. The solution was right beside me. “Please let me help too!”

Ash’s bright smile had shone a light on the way forward.

“Are you sure? It might not be my place to say this, but it will be a burden on top of your regular workload.”

“I don’t mind! I’ll do it! Please let me help!”

I was not going to let go of this light and lose sight of the way again.

“You seem quite motivated. I guess I have no reason to refuse your help.”

“Thank you!”

“I look forward to working together.” Ash tilted his head, a beaming smile on his face. “...But will you not get into trouble if anyone sees us like this?”

While leaning forward, I had grasped Ash’s hand as if I was about to embrace him.

“Renge, I have some more reports for you—”

Ms. Azami really arrived at the worst possible moment.

“Oh my...”

After her murmur, her shocked expression quickly turned into a wicked smile.

“Sorry for intruding!”

The door was closed again before I had a chance to correct this huge misunderstanding.

“Eek?!”

I realized I let out this high-pitched scream whenever I experienced extreme embarrassment. That was something I didn’t have to know about myself...

Itsuki’s Perspective

He had many names. The red-haired boy (this one was quite cute). The Sweets Boy. Sir George’s adjutant. The Dorm’s Sous-chef. The Secret Leader. Tomato-head. Head of Prisoners. Werewolf Slayer (even though he didn’t kill it).

And finally, Phoenix.

Anyone hearing that one person had this many names would have been surprised. And so was I. Usually, someone like him would have been referred to with a mundane name like “Ash from Noscula.” Although I had to admit that “Tomato-head” was quite funny. *Hahaha. His hair’s bright red, after all.*

Apparently, that one originated from an insult directed at the prince who had suffered mental decline from eating too much of the red fruit. Even Mrs. Rihn, who had reprimanded people for using that nickname, seemed to agree with ninety percent of the reasoning behind it.

Speaking of tomatoes, at the time of the soap incident, I had actually felt as if someone had fed me a poisonous tomato—that was how badly my stomach was turned. However, as it turned out, tomatoes weren’t even poisonous. As such, was it possible that the kid nicknamed “Tomato-head” only appeared like a dangerous madman from the outside, but in reality...?

“Lord Itsuki, Ash brought you a present.”

After hearing the maid announce my guest, I stared at the documents in front of me on my desk. Even though we had passed the peak of the winter period, I was still busy, so if it was just a present, he could—

“I will let him in.”

As I was ruminating over whether to let him in or not, the maid just decided for me.

“Hey, Ran. Are you not going to ask my intentions?”

“The present appears to be homemade by Lady Maika.”

“What are you waiting for, then?”

She bowed while gloating as if to say, “I told you so,” before proceeding to let in the guest.

Ash charmed the strict maid with a childlike smile and whispered to her, “Ran, thank you for the warm reception. I left some sweets that I made from the leftovers in Kikyo’s office.”

“Lord Itsuki, I will take my leave now as I have some business to attend to. If

you need anything, please call for me.”

That “business” was most definitely the sweets he just mentioned. *Quite bold of you to bribe and get bribed in front of me.*

As my face twitched, the small invader offered me the warm food he had brought with an innocent smile. “I made this okonomiyaki together with Maika. Chef Yacoo told me you have not had lunch yet. Your bad habits have everyone worried!”

“Yes, you’re right. I’m sorry.” *Why am I the one apologizing after he bribed my maid?*

But no matter how much I wanted to object, it was true that I hadn’t eaten lunch yet, and the food Ash had brought along looked delicious. The savory smell had made me stop caring. I didn’t hesitate to sink my teeth into the bread-like food.

“Oh! This is great!”

The fried batter had a fragrant yet salty taste. It was filled with leaf vegetables and pork, making it a filling meal. And since you could hold it with a spoon, you didn’t have to dirty your hands either.

“What’s this called again?”

“It is a pseudo-okonomiyaki.”

“I haven’t heard that name before. Why ‘pseudo’?”

“The ingredients are different from the recipe and it tastes different than expected too.”

Ash’s look was filled with an extraordinary zeal. One day, he was surely going to make a perfect version of the dish. I had witnessed Yacoo becoming like this from time to time. I knew that if I told him that even now it was already delicious enough, he would only become angry at himself.

Apparently, there were many things—like the balance of the acidity and the smoothness of the texture—that needed to be considered when cooking a meal. I had no idea myself. Although I did taste the difference when someone presented me with a meal that was cooked to perfection. I decided to just stay

silent and look forward to that future meal. *Do your best.*

Still, it was really good. After recovering from the werewolf incident, Ash had started to send me various new dishes via Maika and Yacoo. All of them were unusual and delicious, but this one really spoke to my taste. It had a simple yet rich flavor. As I was thinking to myself, I hungrily devoured the food.

“By the way, Lord Itsuki, Quid gave me a warning.” Nonchalantly, but also with slight caution, Ash began talking. “It appears that an unfamiliar peddler has been getting nosy regarding matters not concerning his trade.”

“Hm? Well, that’s not unusual.”

They must have been a spy. Probably from a noble family living in the central territories. They were known for that. But there was hardly anything here that needed to be kept a secret. Recently, we made a machine that could fly, soap, compost, and started to approve of tomatoes as food... *Darn it.*

Maybe I did need to come up with some countermeasures after all. I had been careless. Until recently, a spy would not have found much material in this rural area apart from the occasional appearances of demons, so I hadn’t made any efforts to secure our intelligence. We were defenseless. Since we had spent our spare time and energy dealing with the demons, it may have been inevitable, but considering recent developments, it was not safe to keep our secrets out in the open.

“However, they seem to be looking for a missing person that has come here in the past year or two. Judging from their goods, they are a merchant from the capital.”

My optimism disappeared when Ash relayed further information. A missing person. The past year or two. From the capital. As the words came in through my ears, I could hear the alarm bells ringing and I felt my face stiffen.

In a hurry, I averted my eyes from Ash. I had the bad habit of letting everything show on my face. I always tried my best to keep a straight face, but to no avail. My dear sister, who was the exact opposite, would have made a much better successor to the count... *But now’s not the time for that.*

“My name was mentioned to that peddler in light of my newly-gained fame

from receiving the silver medal. Quid told me to watch out for him, so do you think I should also alert Mrs. Rihn and Sir George?”

“Hmm...”

Damn those bastards from the capital. They had come all the way to the countryside to snoop around for information on Arthur. Did they really not know when to stop? How did these old geezers not feel ashamed for ganging up and trying to use Arthur? I was used to them being annoying, but they had gone too far this time.

Nevertheless, it was not befitting of an acting count to just stay angry. I needed to adopt my brother-in-law’s presence of mind and my dear sister’s composure. For the time being, I should do as Ash said and alert Rihn and Baleas—and Yae too—to make sure that no one is getting near Arthur.

Wait a moment. The boy in front of me had asked if he should alert the two. In other words, he hadn’t consulted them yet. If this were just about being approached by a suspicious person, surely he would have first turned for advice to someone closer to him. As a student of the academy, he should have talked to one of the teachers first. And it was not like he was in a position where it was difficult for him to approach them. Ash had entangled all three of my trusted confidants. So, why did he go out of his way to come to me and bring me a meal just to tell me this directly? Moreover, we were alone in this room. Enticed by the sweets, Ran had left the room earlier. It was the ideal situation to weed out anyone that potentially didn’t know the secret. Did he know?

I stared at Ash’s face. He gave off a mature impression, while still undeniably looking like an innocent child. The look on his face said, “I don’t know anything.” All these cues and he still feigned ignorance. This pretty much confirmed it for me—he knew something. Or perhaps almost everything.

“So you decided to tell me before Baleas and Rihn?” I asked.

“Yes. I thought you would be interested, so I came straight to you. Arthur would probably also love to hear about it.”

I knew it! I felt happy rather than surprised. He knew about our domain’s secret. He knew about Arthur. And still, he signaled that he wasn’t going to ask me anything. He was prepared to keep it a secret if that was what I wished. He

hinted that he was going to stay silent, pretending not to know anything. It reminded me of our first meeting. After telling him about my difficult experiences at the academy, I told him, “You can’t completely free yourself of your status, but... it’s a good chance to make friends of your own age.” To which he generously replied, “I will try my best to talk to your younger brother.” Back then, I was impressed by his magnificent smile devoid of any fear or selfishness. He had seemed to genuinely enjoy himself.

It appeared that at this very moment he still adhered to his promise of getting along with my younger brother. He treated Arthur simply as the youngest child of the Amanobe family, and here in front of me, as a friend.

My dear brother, you can consider yourself extremely lucky to have a friend who worries this much about you. I wonder what you would say if I explained this to you. I’d love to see your reaction, but now’s not the time.

I felt frustration building up inside of me and turning into a warped smile. No wonder my dear sister and brother-in-law had recommended Ash and told me to let him share a room with Arthur. And with a kind friend like that, it was also no surprise that my younger brother’s smile had become bright and warm again, even though it had been so cold at first.

“I guess I can say that it was a stroke of luck that you joined the academy this year.”

“I also feel very lucky. I have been able to do all the things that I want.”

He didn’t mention a single word about experiencing any hardships, but rather how lucky he considered himself. This was getting interesting. In a roundabout way, he was letting me know that he was prepared to keep helping and staying silent to protect Arthur. He really didn’t try to find out anything. Not why Arthur was hiding his true identity nor what the circumstances were. He didn’t want to know Arthur’s real name either. He didn’t even want to know who the enemy was. *You really have a great friend here, my dear brother. You’re at least as lucky as me.*

I decided to act for the sake of my younger brother. Inspired by his reliable friend, I was going to act in a way that was befitting of an older brother. Not as the acting count, but as an older brother.

“I see. I’ll take the necessary precautions so that you can keep having as much fun as you want. For now, just keep going on as usual. *She* would want it that way too.”

“Yes, please rest assured.”

Ash showed himself to be quick on the uptake. He really did pay close attention to details, allowing the conversation to progress smoothly. It was as if we were effortlessly dancing along to the rhythm of an uplifting song.

“That suspicious peddler is not good for the education of our students,” I remarked.

“You are right. We already have Quid as a merchant, so there is no need to get involved with a peddler if they seem suspicious even in the slightest.”

There was a mutual understanding that under no circumstances we were going to let them interact with Arthur. That was good. Now we just needed to find a way to divert the spy’s attention to somewhere further away.

Apparently, Ash had the same idea. “By the way, Quid will start selling toy model planes soon. Will there be another exhibition?”

I hadn’t heard about anything like that, but if there were to be such an exhibition, no one would be talking about Arthur for quite a while. I assumed that, since Ash himself had mentioned it, he was ready to host it.

When conferring the medals, I had noticed how uneasy Ash was in front of a crowd despite his theatrical personality and actions. And yet he was willing to play such an obtrusive role. I appreciated that.

“That sounds interesting. I’ll talk to Quid,” I said.

Lousy spies. Don’t think it’ll be that easy to meddle with my brother. First you’ll have to deal with their older brother and friends.

The presentation of the commercial tendon-powered plane was a huge success, surpassing even the merrymaking of the awarding ceremony.

We had spread around the word via post-horse, but the unexpected success had unfortunately also worn out the guards. In order to show my appreciation, I

treated them to some wine casks with my pocket money, but even my pockets started to slowly become empty. *I guess I'll just have Baleas treat them to drinks next time.*

In any case, those damned spies from the capital must have been at a loss by now. That served them right. When I told my accomplice Ash, he agreed with a smile all over his face, saying, "Poor spies." In that regard, he was quite different from the serious Baleas. Maybe a bit scary even. But it was the right attitude to deal with those ill-natured bastards from the capital.

Ever since then, my reliable accomplice had started to casually visit my office more often.

"Good day, Lord Itsuki."

"Hey, hello. What is it today, Ash? Oh, you don't need to worry about Ran. I appreciate that you are suspicious, but she knows."

"Oh, okay. Let me be brief, then. I was approached by someone who appears to be a spy."

"Hnng?!"

I assure you it wasn't me who almost choked. It was the maid. I'm calm.

This was the natural consequence of standing out, after all. However, I didn't deny that the frankness of Ash's statement was bad for my heart.

"What did they say?"

"As expected, something seemed off. They asked me about my circle of friends, so I misled them by using Father Folke as a decoy. Considering that he is a recluse who came from the capital and avoids human contact whenever possible, he seemed like a good fit. I think they will probably go investigate Noscula village."

While Tomato-head briskly reported how he had dealt with the spy, all I could do was nod along. I could not have handled the situation better. Next to me, Ran gave me a discerning look, as if to say, "Don't just nod along and do your job!" I understood where she was coming from, but there was no time for me to get any words in. Besides, what did she want me to say? That he shouldn't

have carelessly talked to a spy? Ash had only faithfully carried out what we had agreed upon in advance. He was supposed to befuddle those shady people sniffing around Arthur's affairs. Although I had not anticipated that his techniques were going to include information warfare on top of him making himself the center of attention through a flashy exhibition. Moreover, the gears were already in motion and the presumed result was promising.

Oh? Was this what my three confidants had meant when they said in their reports that there hadn't been any problems?

"I doubt they will do anything violent, but you should probably send a message to Noscula village," Ash suggested.

"Yeah, I'll let them know. As long as my dear brother-in-law is at the village, he can easily take care of one or two of the likes of those spies in the unlikely event that things do get violent." Whenever Ash suggested a plan, I had the tendency to readily agree. *Rihn, Yae, Baleas. I think I know how you feel now.*

The progression was laid out from the start. Ash caused some trouble, then he dealt with it by himself until it reached a turning point, and finally, the problem was solved. And if you were only shown the result, all you could say was that there hadn't been any problems. It was strange. I had been prepared for problems to arise, but the moment I had noticed them, everything was already settled. What a reliable young boy.

At the same time, it looked like I was atop a runaway horse who dashed at an amazing speed. On the one hand, I admired the horse, but on the other hand, I worried that it wasn't listening to orders and was running off too far ahead into the future... But now was not the time to think about that! He was reliable! I could depend on him! I had to trust in my dear sister's character judgment. The runaway horse was surely running towards its destination in a straight line.

I collected myself to focus on the issue right in front of me. "However, those spies sure are persistent," I said.

"They are indeed staying quite long, considering that their expenses must not be insignificant either," Ash remarked.

The more time passed, the likelier it was that suspicion was going to arise regarding Arthur. Since he was the youngest child returning from the capital,

the spies must have already been suspecting something.

“How about we get Arthur away from the city?” Hearing me murmur, Ash seemed puzzled. It must have been a bit too sudden for him. “There is an outdoor training camp that is part of the military academy’s curriculum. It usually takes place in summer, and we could move it forward to now. If we remove the target of investigation from the city, we might be able to gain some time,” I elaborated.

“That makes sense. It sounds like it could work, but moving out of the city also means temporarily letting down our guard.”

He was right. There were advantages as well as disadvantages.

“But so far there haven’t been any reports that the spies approached Arthur, either. Now that they aren’t watching too closely, it’s probably the safest time to move out.”

“You are right, there have not been any spies in Arthur’s vicinity so far. Ah, I see. If we move to somewhere less guarded now, it will also send the message that none of the students at the academy really require high security. That is indeed a good bluff.”

A bluff? Ahaha, right, yes. Of course that was my intention... If only my sister would have taken over as the acting count at times like these. She would have definitely planned ahead with those intentions in mind.

As I was complaining to myself on the inside, Ash seemed to have gathered his thoughts and he nodded in agreement. “Lord Itsuki. If we are going to have the outdoor training camp, may I make some suggestions?”

“What do you have in mind? I want to make sure that everything goes according to plan, so I welcome even the most trivial opinion.”

To be honest, I was not good at strategizing or espionage. The Count of Sacula’s politics and military specialized in dealing with demons. We didn’t really have tacticians or spies.

“Firstly, could you deploy Sir George and his subordinates as escorts? Secondly, I would like to take my hunting equipment. And finally, is it possible to set the camp up in the forest near Noscula village?”

I didn't have any issues with the first point, since I had intended to send along Baleas anyway. I also didn't mind the hunting equipment, which was more than adequate for an outdoor training camp. And I didn't see anything wrong with the final point, either. That forest had been used as a spot for the camp in the past. Besides, we could count on the assistance of my dear sister and brother-in-law in case something went wrong.

"Just to confirm, why do you want to use the forest near Noscula village?" I asked.

The red-haired boy, or "the cute sweets boy," as the maids called him, showed a radiant smile upon hearing my question. "I am familiar with that place and I am confident that I could easily run through the forest to make it to Noscula in case something happens."

That was indeed a good reason. Once they reached the village, my dear brother-in-law and the others could help them.

"Although I would use the hunting tools before running away. As of now, I am confident enough that I could take on a pack of wolves or a family of bears with my full equipment." A smirk came over his face.

Yes, he truly was reliable. Very reliable. Not scary at all.

Maika's Perspective

Ash had come to my room. That in itself was already unusual, but judging from his serious expression, I knew he was about to tell me something important.

"I would like to ask you a favor, Maika."

"Sure! Leave it to me! I'll do anything!"

If it was Ash asking, I didn't need to know anything before agreeing. Even if it involved a bear or a werewolf. *Count me in!* I didn't make any effort to hide my feelings and Ash seemed delighted at my reply.

"As expected! I can always count on you!"

Haa—! I can't get enough of that smile! And it was meant just for me! That

was my reward for always staying by his side and helping him out.

But please forgive me, Ash. While I had laid my feelings bare, there were still some secret doors that I kept closed. My mom had told me that a maiden should always keep some secrets to herself. According to her, that increased your bargaining power. That was also why Ash was so strong—he was full of secrets. I was never able to predict what he was going to do next. It was the source of his strength.

So, what did he say again? Oh right, he wanted to ask me for a favor.

“What do you need from me? I told you the progress of the brick research team yesterday, so I’m guessing you want me to ask my uncle a favor?” Those were about the only things that I could think of that Ash would need my help with.

“I just wanted to alert you just in case... It appears that we will be going on an outdoor training camp with the academy. Probably very soon. They might even ask us to start packing tomorrow.”

“What, really?”

Reina had told me that there was going to be such an event around summer, but even she didn’t know it was going to be this soon. Since Ash knew about it, it was probably safe to assume that this wasn’t normal. Then again, once Ash got involved, even normal things stopped being normal. I knew that all too well.

“The camp will be in the forest near Noscula village. Since people who grew up in the city are not familiar with such an environment, they are probably prone to panic in the event that something goes wrong.”

“You’re right. Even people as reliable as Reina and Glen are only really used to life in the city. And while Arthur and Hermes are both smart, they don’t have nearly enough experience in the woods.”

“Exactly. You, on the other hand, went foraging every year and have accompanied me on strolls through the forest.”

“Yes!”

After Ash had trained as a hunter, he had started roaming beyond the area

designated for gathering plants. Of course, I had wanted to tag along. Just the two of us, going on a date through the forest...

“Therefore, you are more used to the woods than all the other students. If anything happens, I would like you to help everyone else. Especially...” With a gentle expression, Ash fixed his serious gaze upon me. “...Arthur.”

“Yeah, got it.” *Don’t worry, Ash. I know exactly what you want from me.*

He hadn’t explicitly said anything, but I understood loud and clear. I had been observing Ash for a while now. His gaze. His body language. What he was looking at. How he interacted with people. I noticed even the smallest differences.

“Say, Ash, do you remember your fight with the werewolf?” I suddenly asked.

“Uhm, yes, of course I do.”

Ah, Ash straightened his back and entered remorse mode. *You can relax. Your mom already lectured you a lot, so I won’t scold you anymore. At least not today.*

“Do you also remember that you told me to take care of Arthur afterwards?”

“Of course.”

Ash’s expression changed to a smile as sparkling as the sunlight shining through honey. It was the same smile that he always showed when I solved a difficult problem. I felt happy. In other words, this meant that I had just impressed him.

“You know, I’ve got some complicated feelings regarding Arthur,” I confessed.

Like, you’re roommates. And he lives with you. And you share a room!

“But even so, I still like Arthur. He’s kind and gentle, although a bit reserved. It irritates me to see him hold back, but it’s also cute to see how happily he tags along when given a push. I just feel like I can’t leave him alone.”

Besides, he tried helping Ash with all his might. Arthur may have looked meek, but he actually carried great strength. Keeping up with Ash, who always unpredictably ran away at full speed, was a difficult task that easily led one to become dizzy. First of all, one had to understand what Ash was even trying to

do. And even with my insight as his childhood friend, that was still a massive task! All in all, I just couldn't leave alone anyone who tackled such a difficult task with the same elan as me.

"Of course, I'll look after Arthur if you ask me to. I can't guarantee how useful I'll be in the worst-case scenario, but I'll do my best!" I proclaimed.

"Thank you, Maika. I am glad I can always count on you," Ash replied with the biggest smile.

I should be the one thanking you.

• • •

"Finally, we have arrived!"

After marching for a day and a half, those were the words that escaped my mouth. It sounded like I had come back home. And in a way, I had, even though there was a thick forest stretching out in front of me.

The academy students had marched all the way from the distant city to camp out here in nature to hone their forest survival skills. We were in the forest near Noscula village, where I had trained as a hunter under Ban, so you could say that this splendid forest was my home ground.

"There are some edible wild plants around here. Let us pick them up."

Passing by, I plucked bits of this wonderful plant that got rid of the smell of meat.

"Can't we leave this for later?" Sir George, who was leading the group, gently rebuked.

His tone was probably not too harsh because he expected me to enrich our camp meals after seeing me find an edible plant that he hadn't even noticed. The preserved food which we had brought along was so bad that it had already lost its appeal after the third meal. I had distributed it countless times to the soldiers on patrol while helping Sir George organize the equipment, but I had not expected it to be this bad. I even started to feel a bit guilty even though the taste was not my fault at all.

Accordingly, I looked Sir George straight in the eye, giving an honest

explanation as if I was praying to the gods. “Sir George, if we have these plants, we can boil them together with the dried meat and make the soup taste much better. Adding the right berries and wildflowers, it will even turn out quite delicious. We can even use the soup to soak the hard-baked biscuits until they are soft enough to enjoy.”

Everyone, including Lord Arthur and Lady Reina, held their breaths. Lady Maika was diligently picking up the plants in my place.

It appeared that my passionate yet logical explanation had persuaded Sir George too. “Hm, yeah. I get what you’re saying, but I want to secure the campsite first. Not everyone is as energetic as you are.”

“Hm... You have a point too.”

He was right. While the students who had grown up in villages were still fine, those who came from the city were tired from marching for a day and a half. Lord Arthur and Lady Reina also looked like they were having a hard time.

“How about I procure the ingredients myself while you go ahead and set up camp? Dividing up the tasks is more efficient as well,” I proposed.

“But it would be troublesome if we split up in the forest. Won’t it be hard for you to find our campsite on your own?”

“Not at all. With all due respect, may I remind you that I spent some time as a hunter in Noscula village?”

As I mentioned earlier, you could say that this place was my home ground. Even in the extreme case of losing all my provisions and equipment, I was confident that I could survive for three days and make it back to Noscula village on my own.

“And while I do not know where the campsite is, I can easily find it by following your footsteps.”

Following the path of a group with more than ten people in a forest without many animal trails was easier than finding edible plants. I had learned how to track wild animals from Ban, after all. When it came to city folk who were not used to running through the woods, I even felt confident that I could pursue them at night.

Seeing me brimming with confidence, Sir George could no longer oppose me. “You’re making it hard for me to object... Maika, as a fellow villager you should know how capable Ash is in that regard, so what do you think?”

Having finished gathering all the edible plants that she could find, Lady Maika seemed pleased with herself, but her expression stiffened after hearing Sir George’s question. “Will Ash be fine on his own? Judging purely from his abilities, I would say there is no need to worry... He even came back by himself after being knocked out by a wild boar,” Lady Maika reminisced while murmuring to herself. *Sorry for always making you worry.* “But I’m still a bit worried to just leave him alone. We don’t know what might happen, so it’s probably best—”

“How about you accompany me then, Maika?” I suggested.

“Yes! George, I don’t think there will be any problems! Just leave it to me and Ash!”

Luckily, he somehow agreed to our proposal.

After separating from the other students, Lady Maika and I walked briskly through the woods. She looked more cheerful than usual, breathing the fresh air of the forest, which she must have missed in the city.

“It’s been a while since we’ve walked in the forest, just the two of us,” she said.

“Yes, it is delightful. We need to make the most of times like these.”

“Yeah! Ah, that one over there is edible too, right?”

We both were familiar with the plants, since we used to come here to gather every season. While we were at it, we also picked up branches that could be used as firewood, as well as stalks and ivy to set up traps. We planned to stay here for three days, but I did not intend to only eat dried meat that entire time. I swore on the name of Ban that I was going to make a delicious meal using fresh meat.

After gathering ingredients and other materials for a while, we set out to track down the others. They had walked so recklessly that all the plants in their

path were wrecked and the soil dug up. Also, I probably could have followed them by picking up their scent. No animal left such an odor while walking.

“I don’t think I could track them down just by smelling,” Lady Maika said.

“You have never gone hunting in the forest, so that is normal. Besides, my five senses are quite sharp.”

Ban had even praised my sense of smell and hearing before, saying I had good perception. Strangely enough, my senses had only become keener after fighting Sir Werewolf. *I would’ve almost thought that I leveled up, but alas, this isn’t a convenient fantasy world setting. Life’s tough here.* When I had been on the verge of death, some switch in my brain must have flipped.

Following the smell, we discovered footprints and safely made it to the site where everyone was setting up their tents. They appeared to be having a hard time getting it right. As I observed them, I walked towards Sir George to report back.

“You’re back earlier than I expected,” he said.

“What can I say, we are both quite used to walking in the woods.”

As I presented him with our yield, his serious face broke into a smile. “That is a lot. Can I look forward to dinner, then?”

“At the very least, it will be better than lunch today.”

The large pot that Sir George’s attending subordinate had carried along was going to come in handy. However, currently there was not nearly enough firewood—someone had to gather dead branches while others set up the campfire.

“Would you mind if I leave again to gather firewood?” I asked Sir George.

“Did you read my mind? I was just going to ask you. Take some people with you and gather as much as you can.”

Sir George did not sound like he was talking to a young student, but rather a private staffer or subordinate. In other words, he was no longer talking to me as a student, but as his prospective adjutant who was also a relative. It must have been difficult for him to switch his tone like that with me. *But I’m afraid I’m not*

going to stop being myself anytime soon. Sorry.

“Understood. I will try to gather at least enough to cook tomorrow’s breakfast.”

First, I called Lady Maika, Lord Arthur, and Lady Reina, who had all finished setting up their tents. Then, I also enlisted some male helpers, including Hermes and Glen, before deciding that should be enough people. Since there were not many people who came to this area to pick up wood, there were dead branches perfect for making fire lying all around the place, as expected.

Using ivy, I bound up the branches so that they were easier to carry for everyone. Similarly, I also used ivy and straw bags to make traps for catching birds and small animals.

It was a simple contrivance. I made a ring with the ivy, which tightened as soon as a head or a foot got trapped inside. Adding bent branches and stones, you could turn it into a fun little device that was triggered by footsteps and lifted the prey up in the trees. Although I had never used such a large-scale trap myself, since it required a lot of time and effort to set up.

Impressed, Lord Arthur observed my trap. “How clever.”

“The principle is quite simple. Once you practice enough you can make them in an instant.”

I showed them how to make one of these “the prey gets caught in the ring without noticing and then proceeds to tighten it by continuing to walk forward” sort of trap.

The others seemed intrigued too and glanced towards us.

“We gathered quite a bit of firewood already, so how about we make some traps with everyone together?” Since we had some time at our hands, I asked the others to help out.

The hardest part about setting hunting traps was finding a place where the prey walked by. My observation skills were not nearly as good as Ban’s, so I had to make up for it by placing as many traps as possible.

Pretty much as expected, Hermes was the first one to master building the

trap. Although Glen gave up almost immediately and returned to gathering dried branches, he was still impressed that you could make such a device by substituting rope with ivy.

Since the campsite was near a river in order to secure water for drinking and other necessities, I also decided to set up some traps to catch fish. It reminded me of my first incident in the forest. After performing various tasks, the sunlight shining into the forest started turning scarlet.

“It is getting late. We should go back.”

I would have liked to set up a few more traps, but it would have to wait for the next day. If we did not start preparing dinner soon, it was going to be dark in an instant.

“We made a lot of traps in this short amount of time,” Lady Reina said, impressed. But she should have held off her praise until we knew how much they had actually caught.

Honestly, I would have been satisfied if our traps rewarded a tenth of our effort. At that moment, I realized that we probably should have focused on making the fish traps first, since those were more likely to succeed. And since it was summer, it was also possible to catch some freshwater crabs. That was a blunder.

As I confessed my mistake to everyone, Lord Arthur smiled in amazement. “You are just as amazing here in the forest. We already did this much and you are still aiming for a better result. Whenever I’m impressed, you always take it one step further.”

“Well, I guess this is my appetite’s work... Back at the village, when I wanted to eat meat, hunting for it was the best solution.”

Hunting was the best source of meat in this world. Of course I had wanted to learn how to hunt. In addition, I had been blessed with a great teacher like Ban.

Having learned how to cook while out camping with Ban, that night I was able to improve the horrible dry meat by boiling it in a wildflower soup. Still, I had grown tired of the dry meat; I wanted to make a fish dumpling hotpot tomorrow.

The next day I made the rounds to check on my contraptions and, as I had anticipated, there were no birds or small animals trapped inside. Of course, there were no large animals like boars or deer either. However, I was greeted by a good haul at the river. The cone-shaped trap made out of branches was filled with summer river fish. There were even some crabs among them, promising a delicious hotpot.

To make dinner even more lavish, I decided to go out to gather some rapeseed flowers and berries after lunch.

As Lady Maika and I led the usual suspects through the forest, I noticed a strange presence. It almost felt like a pack of wolves observing us, but their stride was too reckless. They were breaking the vegetation, leaving behind the smell of green. It could not have been a group of wild animals. By process of elimination, they must have been human assassins, then. Most people would probably not have reached that conclusion just normally going through their lives, but we had Lord Arthur with us.

The reason for coming to this camp was to avoid the spies investigating Lord Arthur, so it was not too far-fetched. They must have somehow found out Lord Arthur's true identity before we ran away. As a result, we ended up getting targeted in a situation with decreased security. Our plan had evidently failed. *Instead of trying to guard the secret, we should have stayed in the highly-guarded city, dear Acting Count.*

"Arthur, can you come with me for a moment?" I told them.

"Yeah? Do you need something from me?" Lord Arthur approached me with a puzzled look on their face.

"I think a boar came through here recently, so I want to follow its tracks."

"Oh, really? I can't see anything."

They investigated the ground, searching for the tracks that I had supposedly found, but unfortunately, that was a blatant lie, so there were none. It was a means to lure away the assassins.

"Are you sure I'm the one who should come? Wouldn't Maika or Glen be

more useful?”

“Without Maika, the group would be left without a foraging supervisor, and Glen’s physique, as great as it may be, is not really suited for following tracks.”

I was about to add that, in fact, going alone would have been the best, but Lady Maika, who had been listening, rushed over towards us. “Don’t do anything reckless! Arthur, make sure to keep an eye on Ash!”

“I see. Don’t worry, I’ll look after him in your place.”

Lord Arthur let out a giggle towards the worrywart Lady Maika. Seeing how much they enjoyed themselves, I almost felt like a villain trying to separate Lord Arthur from everyone else by lying to them.

I put the strings on my small bow and dissolved the poison powder in a small bottle filled with potable water so I could spread it on an arrow at any given moment. As I looked up at the sky, I noticed clouds, but it did not seem like it was going to rain for a while.

“Maika, it might rain soon. I will only search for a little bit and then go back. You should head back soon too.”

“What, really? It doesn’t look like it’s going to rain soon, though...” she murmured to herself while looking up at the sky. “Huh?”

“You see, Maika?” I gave my doubtful childhood friend a nod while making eye contact.

“Ah, you’re right!”

She was only a little confused at first, but quick on the uptake, and responded appropriately. Her momentary serious expression almost seemed like an illusion as she swiftly recovered her bright smile.

“I got it. We’ll finish things up and go back as soon as possible. I’ll let George and the others know that you went off on your own.”

She had seen through my lie and guessed why I had resorted to it. Everyone should have a brilliant childhood friend like her. Once Lord Arthur and I were gone, I was sure she was going to meet up with Sir George and ask for help.

“What direction are you heading, Ash?”

“Let me see...”

I could not let the bloodthirsty fellows get close to the students. It was reassuring to have Sir George and his soldiers as protection, but there were still some dangers involved, like the possibility of the children being taken hostage. I was going to prioritize Lord Arthur’s safety and leave the students to Sir George and Lady Maika.

“The boar went northwest, so the opposite direction of the campsite,” I told her.

Lady Maika had already started preparations to go back. While she kept her smile, her face looked cloudy compared to her usual self. *Ah, I’m going to get scolded again once I get back. But I shouldn’t complain about her worrying about me.*

With a bittersweet smile, I held out my fist towards my childhood friend. “I cannot promise I will bring back the boar, but I will make a delicious hot pot when I get back.”

That was my promise that I was going to return safely.

“It’s a promise,” Lady Maika said as if to make sure.

“I will not be beaten by a boar this size.”

She bumped my fist.

“Well, we should get going,” I told Lord Arthur.

I wondered if there was anything else that I should be careful of. I could not think of anything. One last time, I checked the direction of our camp. I turned around to lure away the assassins in the opposite direction.

“Arthur, please follow me.”

“Yeah, I’ll try not to slow you down.”

“Make sure to watch your step. As long as you do not hurt your feet, it will be fine.”

While they may have been better spies and assassins, I was still the better forest hunter.

“This might turn into a slightly unusual hunt,” I murmured.

I had to bring down multiple prey who were chasing us, while at the same time guarding my companion. The difficulty level was not yet known. Bearing in mind their poor tracking skills, it was probably going to be easier than taking on a pack of wolves.

I had to protect the sweet young girl from the villains chasing her for some elusive reason. Hehe, I felt a bit excited. *It's almost like I'm the hero of the story.*

Maika's Perspective

Once Ash was out of sight, I listened carefully to my surroundings. *Ugh.* Since my senses were not as sharp as Ash's, I could not tell where the danger he had felt was coming from. Had they followed them? Or were they still standing watch around here? I hesitated to move out, since I couldn't tell.

Having seen the serious look on Ash's face, I realized how dangerous the situation was. Being separated from him now felt like I was left in the dark after losing my torch. I was agitated and a chill was running down my spine. It was as if I had touched the well water in winter.

Argh! Why did he always try to shoulder the burden by himself even though he knew how dangerous it was? Scolding him after the bear and the werewolf incidents didn't help at all.

Stupid Ash. Stupid, stupid, stupid. He's smarter than me and still so stupid! Ah, but I love that about him! My honest thoughts were mixed in with my anger. How could I like someone that much?

Meanwhile, and in contradiction to my thoughts, I felt as if my feet slowly became glued to the ground as I listened to the sounds of the woods.

“I can't take it anymore! Everyone, let's go back to George at the camp!” I ordered.

Unfortunately, unlike a certain someone, I wasn't very good at holding back. I suddenly got up and grabbed Reina's arm.

“Maika? What's happening?” she asked, confused.

“It’s an emergency, so we have to run back! I’m sorry, but since you’re too slow, I’ll drag you along. Glen, take care of Hermes!”

“Wait, what?”

Reina and the others seemed confused, but there was no time to explain.

“Make sure to follow my lead, Glen! Reina, hold on!”

“Maika, I don’t understa—aah?!”

I picked her up in my arms. She was lighter than expected. *Are you eating enough meat, Reina?* Pointing my chin at them, I urged the other two who still stood in surprise to follow suit. *We’re running out of time.*

“I’m not sure what’s going on, Hermes, but she wants us to move.”

“I can run by myself. You don’t have to carry me.”

“Don’t worry, I’ll carry you on my back!”

“No, I’m oka—aaah?!”

Now that they were ready too, I started running at full speed towards the camp. I had to hurry for the sake of our knight and the princess.

Yes, I knew Arthur’s secret. There was no way that I wouldn’t have figured it out. She looked at Ash with the same eyes as me. We were rivals in love. In fact, I had noticed it ever since submitting the agricultural development plan to Rihn.

Around that time, I started seeing Arthur leaning over Ash’s shoulder and talking to him with their faces next to each other when he was sitting on his desk. No matter how you looked at it, Arthur’s face then was that of a girl. She had that special look in her eyes. She smiled only for him, and whenever he reciprocated, she couldn’t help but fix her bangs while soaking up each word directed at her. I knew that feeling. Still, it was not like I had seen myself in the mirror; I realized that she was just like me, but with a different upbringing.

Naturally, I had been furious at first. Why did a girl share a room with Ash? If that was an option, why couldn’t I have lived with him? It felt like I had grasped an ice-cold blade. But then, I remembered Ash’s look when he had first introduced me to Arthur. Back then, he had already known. Of course he had. If I had realized that Arthur was a girl, there was no way that Ash wouldn’t have.

At that time, Ash's gentle gaze had warmed my heart—it made me realize that there must have been a good reason for this whole situation.

Deciding to find out what was happening, I went to see my uncle ready for a cross-examination, but he let me in on the secret surprisingly quickly.

“From the beginning, I didn't think I could hide the secret from you. After all, you are the daughter of my dear sister Yuika, whom my father called the most talented woman in the domain, and of Sir Klein, who is the best living swordsman. Both of them have a natural gift to read the subtle cues in people's expression and behavior, so I expected the same from you... Although you realized earlier than I had anticipated.”

My uncle had murmured this last sentence while fixing his gaze on my waist. Without realizing it, I had brought along my sword. Maybe that was a bad move, but either way, he told me everything.

Back at the capital, Arthur was being pushed around by all the adults and no one was willing to help her. My uncle had helped her escape the capital to avoid the conflict. However, Arthur, who held back as much as possible to not cause trouble to anyone, was still being pursued.

After hearing the explanation, my emotions spilled over and I exclaimed, “Aah!!” I wondered what exactly that sound had meant. It may have been an expression of my understanding of why Arthur always endured so much and showed that cold smile. It may have also been an expression of sympathy for a girl who had to suffer and persevere to the point of almost breaking apart. At the very least I wanted her to not hold back anymore while she was here at the academy. Or it may have been an expression of understanding of Arthur's pining for something as bright as Ash's summer sun-like smile.

Being led around by Ash, Arthur had lost the time to hold back. She was too busy working on various tasks and eating delicious meals, which eventually led her to genuinely smile. And not only towards Ash, but also towards Reina and me. She even became so upfront about her feelings that she turned bright red and got angry at me for sitting on Ash's bed.

Arthur had become so pretty that I was growing more and more insecure. Several times it got to the point where I wanted to tell her that she was taking

my place. I'm not good at restraining myself, but I did my best to hold back. I did it for Arthur. So much so that I almost wanted Ash to praise me for it.

Regardless, to think that Arthur had come this far and they were still pursuing her! I was never going to forgive those who bullied my friend and rival in love. If they ever came close to me, I was going to take good care of their heads...
Unlike Arthur, I'm not the type to hold back after all.

"George!" I immediately yelled as soon as I arrived at the campsite.

Apparently, George had left for a bit, but his subordinates ran off to call him right away. Seeing how they were barely able to conceal their nervousness, some of them must have also known about Arthur.

"What happened, Maika? Where's Arthur? And Ash?"

And of course, George knew too. My uncle had told me that, if there was ever any trouble related to Arthur, I should ask George for advice.

"They went that way to chase after a wild boar," I said meaningfully.

"They ran off together?" he asked.

From that alone, George was able to tell that something troublesome had happened. He looked a bit like Ash as he pondered his next move with a serious face.

"Maika, let's talk over there. If we can get hold of a boar, we should also help."

He came up with an excuse that allowed us two to go back the way that I had come from. Of course, we walked as quickly as possible.

"So, what's the situation, Maika? Why did Ash and Arthur go off by themselves?"

"I'm not quite sure myself. But Ash said he was going to leave with Arthur, and he told us to quickly meet up with you."

Nodding along, George showed an angry and troubled expression. "Why does that boy always have to be so reckless? Couldn't he have come to us? Or did the situation not really allow for that?"

“Hm... Maybe not?”

After all, Ash had said multiple times after the bear and werewolf incidents that he would have run away if possible. And it didn't sound like an excuse to me. I still didn't forgive him, though.

“That probably means that there are several enemies, then. I doubt there's twenty or thirty of them, but even against just five, it would be difficult for us to protect everyone. Especially if they took anyone hostage... Ash must have thought the same thing and decided to lure them away, so we could corner them from both sides. A very Ash-like thing to do.” George distorted his mouth into a smile mixed with anger. “I've heard about his fight with the bear at the village. And the prisoners told me about what happened during his fight with the werewolf too. He really is something else. He always chooses the method that ends up causing the least harm to everyone but himself. Quite the bad habit, if you ask me.”

Yes, George! It really is a bad habit! But...

“...But he's a great guy,” George said as if to finish my thought.

I couldn't have said it any better!

Arthur was currently being protected by a boy whom even George acknowledged as a wonderful person. And since I didn't like hiding my emotions, I was just going to come out and admit it, *I wish I could have been the princess protected by the knight!*

Arthur's Perspective

Even though we had only walked for a short while, Maika and the others were no longer in sight and I couldn't hear their voices, either. I took in the forest with all five of my senses. It was like a completely different world compared to the city. Here in this world, Ash was crouching down on the grass and examining something. I wondered what the forest looked like to someone with hunting experience like him.

For an instant, Ash narrowed his eyes with an extremely sharp look. I was startled by that unfamiliar expression of his. However, the next moment he

showed me his usual smile.

“Arthur, let me teach you how to set up another trap,” he said.

“Another trap?”

I was still bothered by his sharp expression from a moment ago, but since he didn't mention anything, I didn't ask either. I had faith in him. More than anything, I was intrigued by the new trap he was showing me. It was really simple. To me it just looked like grass that had been tied together into a ring.

“Can you make them like this? I want you to put lots over there.”

“Sure, but... Is this for catching the boar?”

Even if the boar got caught in the trap, it was likely only going to fall over and run away again before we could catch it.

“Get moving.” His reply was unexpectedly sharp.

Had something happened? His look from earlier and now this.

I nodded and lowered my voice. “I imagine there's a reason for all this.”

“Yes, I will explain as we are making the traps.”

If Ash said it was necessary, I was prepared to do anything.

As we were working on the traps, Ash regained his soft demeanor and explained the reason for his strange behavior. “It appears that we have been followed by people who are after you.”

This was the first time that Ash's words had felt so harsh and cold. I felt despair—as if my heart had been pierced by a shard of ice. I didn't even have any time to think about smoothing things over with another lie. Blood gushed out from my broken heart and my whole body froze. It was similar to my encounter in our room with Maika, yet much more impactful. I would have preferred to die on the spot.

“...Why?” Still freezing, I finally managed to get out a single word.

Why had Ash said that? Why did he know that I was being targeted? Why? Why? I was afraid to even think about it. It felt as if my whole body was being pierced by ice splinters. Was it possible that Ash knew my secret?

“It is difficult to put it into words. It is the same intuition that kicks in when a wolf or a boar is preying on me. I am sorry I cannot explain it better.”

That's not what I mean. I don't care about that.

I was used to being targeted by people. I didn't care who disliked me or hated me. I had persevered until now, and I was not going to give up at this point. But I didn't want Ash to hate me. That would have been a fate worse than death. After all, I was a liar.

Nervously, and with timid words, I tried to find out what was on Ash's mind. I was terrified of the answer. I didn't want to hear it. I wanted to disappear before Ash told me I was a liar. However, I was still here, trembling from the bottom of my heart, as Ash's reply came swinging down upon me.

“I did not exactly know your secret. I just guessed that something was going on and that you had a good reason for it.” Those words were unbelievably warm. “Please do not make that face. No matter your real name, I will not change the way I talk to you.”

His words were even gentler than usual, like a hearth on a cold winter day. He put his hands on top of mine, the hands of a liar. They were the same warm hands that had easily chased away my nightmare.

“I want you to help me. I want you to assist me. There are still so many things left that I want to do, and I am counting on your outstanding support from here on out too,” he gently said.

Did I really deserve those words? Was it okay for a liar like me to stay next to Ash?

Normally, anyone in his position would have been angry. They would have cursed me, calling me a liar, blaming me for causing so much trouble. Normally, anyone would have stopped being friends in a situation like this... But Ash was not normal.

“I do not care what anyone else says. I need your help. And as a first step, I want you to help me save you.”



Hearing him speak, I once again realized how special he was. Yeah, Ash was not normal. And as someone who had spent all this time together with him, I felt like I was no longer normal, either. No one could have stayed normal when faced with that expression, which made you feel as comfortable as holding your hands over a burning bonfire.

My shivering hands grabbed back his in return. The ice shards that had pierced my heart melted as if they had never been there in the first place. After all, that just had been my imagination. Just another lie that I had told myself. I had been fixed on those thoughts, ignoring reality. Ash had not behaved coldly towards me. He was the same considerate and warm Ash as always.

Suddenly, it all seemed clear to me. Ash hadn't found out my lie. Thinking back, he never really called me "Arthur" whenever he wanted to talk to the real me. So he hadn't found out my lie so much as he had found the real me.

"I-If I can be of any help, and if you're okay with me, I want to do whatever I can."

There was no longer any need to hide my identity from him. He had seen through the charade from the start. Ash had been the first friend of the real me from the beginning.

"As someone who is always relying on others, I heartily welcome your help."

I was happy that you were there for me. I could say with confidence that I was not going to care this much about anyone else for the rest of my life.

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I ordered her to run ahead of me. Panicking at the sudden movement of their targets, the assassins had also set out from their hiding place. Hidden in the grass, I took a shot with my short bow. Unfortunately, it was too sudden and far away to hit, but I had expected this much. This was supposed to be a warning shot to let them know that we had noticed them and that we were carrying weapons.

Sure enough, I heard their flustered voices.

"Watch out. We've been found out."

“Don’t let them get away! And make sure to dispose of that other brat too.”

Dispose of us? *Please don’t use such unsettling language this casually! Otherwise, I’ll be too scared to go easy on you.*

As I ran off to catch up with the girl that I was supposed to protect, I also enticed the assassins to follow me. They tried to use their numbers to their advantage and encircle us, but they did not know how to move around in the forest. Those who had split up to the left and right were slowed down by the bad footing and limited vision. The other two that had chosen to stay on the middle path right behind me got caught in the trap we had been preparing and magnificently fell down.

I reflexively did a double take. Both of them had fallen for a trap that could have easily been avoided if they had anticipated any tricks and slowed down a bit. Those guys really were amateurs inside the forest. Since there were reports that the spies had come from the capital, those guys probably did so too.

As I evaluated our opponents’ strength inside my head, I caught up to the person I was supposed to guard.

“Sorry to make you wait.”

“Ash! Have they already caught up?”

“No, it is only me. Those people are not used to running around the forest. It may be easier than expected to get rid of them.”

She was a bit relieved after hearing my assessment of the situation.

“We should set up some more traps around here,” I said.

“Okay, let’s do it.”

“They fell over from your traps earlier. That was a good job.”

“R-Really?”

Of course, I’ve got no way to verify it, but let’s just say it is the case.

Judging from her little smile, it appeared that Arthur was no longer nervous. Maybe it was just my imagination, but her smile even seemed a bit fiendish as she laid out a trap. Why was I drawn towards that kind of expression when it

came to women?

Leaving all the traps on the ground to her, I started working on a contraption at eye height. There was a point where the trees on both sides leaned into the path, narrowing the passage and making it ideal for this trap. I bent the branches in that area and fixed them so that they would whip onto the face of anyone who pulled the trigger made of ivy at chest height. However, since having a single string of ivy hanging in that area was unnatural and too obvious, I camouflaged it by wrapping it around a bunch of other loose ivy plants. It was still possible to make it out if you paid attention, but the question was if the assassins, who did not know their way around the forest, would notice it.

“They still have not caught up. Could they have lost us already?”

How pathetic to lose us already at this distance and speed! Although they probably would eventually catch up following our footsteps, this gave me time to add sharp little twigs to the tip of the branches that would hit their faces. I even rounded off my delicate handiwork with a touch of poison. I felt like my fingers had become nimbler since I started working on my craftsmanship with Hermes and Am.

When everything was fully prepared, I heard the group of assassins approach.

“It is time to run away. Please keep going straight in that direction. I will follow after trying to slow them down a bit.”

“Understood. Be careful.”

“I will be with you right away.”

Hiding in a nearby patch of grass, I fixed an arrow to the string of my short bow. Unlike the earlier warning shot, I was using a poisoned arrow. I was aiming for the narrow passage where the trees were crowding and I had placed the traps. Passing through that area, their movement was going to be severely restricted, making them easy targets.

The bunch approached making a lot of noise from the point of view of a hunter. Two of them tried to get through the narrow passage, but they got stuck in the traps Arthur had set out. Realizing what had happened, they started cursing. In turn, their attention was drawn to their feet, which finally led to one

of them carelessly cutting the ivy in front of them. The bent branches swooshed towards one of the men's faces. In tandem with the screams of the man who had been caught off guard by the surprise attack, I shot an arrow at the other one. Against a backdrop of angry screams of bewilderment and pain, I ran off.

"There he is!"

"Go after him! Come on, that's just a scratch! How long do you plan on screaming?"

Yes, it's just a scratch, so come on and follow me. I quite liked people who were passionate about their work. They were easy to deal with.

Looking over my shoulder, I saw all six of them pursuing me. The one with his right eye clogged by blood and the one who pulled out and threw away the arrow from his right shoulder looked very angry. *You come prepared to kill and yet you get angry when your target fights back a little? I'll have you know that I'm much angrier for almost getting killed by your planned surprise attack.*

After thirty seconds of having them follow my shadow, I heard a loud bang from behind.

"What are you doing? Get up!"

"Wait, something's off."

"He's foaming at the mouth! Did he get poisoned?"

"M-My body feels kind of numb too..."

It was the first time that I had used the poison on a human, but considering that it worked against a giant bear, it took effect even faster with humans.

Using their confusion to my advantage, I sprinted towards Arthur. For a moment, she seemed scared at the approaching footsteps, but when she saw me pull up next to her, she smiled with a gasp. It appeared that my sporty charm alleviated her fatigue.

"Sorry for making you wait again."

"I'm glad you made it. I heard some screams. Are you fine?"

"Not a single scratch. But two of our pursuers have dropped out."

Since I had managed to buy more time, I decided to set up an even more intricate trap this time. First, we were going to completely disappear. We had arrived at a clearing that was probably the result of a large tree falling over. Here we trampled down the grass on purpose up to the center. This left our footprints on the ground, which we then backtracked until we jumped into a thicket where it was difficult to check our further footprints. As such, our trace made it seem to our pursuers as if we had suddenly vanished into thin air.

Arthur admired our tracks, almost forgetting that we were being chased.

“I-I see. This is really smart.”

“Hehe, animals often use this smart method.”

Her eyes sparkled when I told her that I was just a fool in comparison, and that even an expert hunter like Ban still often got outflanked by animals.

“Really? I want to see an animal outrun you.”

It was very much like her to show such brimming curiosity. For the time being, I had her hide in a well-hidden spot as I started to place traps around the clearing. Most of them were the same as the ones used already. However, this time I was not going to wait for them to set off the traps, but rather implement some mechanisms for me to trigger them too. I took a final look over the clearing before climbing up a tree, where I awaited their arrival.

As expected, four assassins came to the clearing. They had probably left behind the two poisoned men. I had anticipated this much, but it was still heartless towards their colleagues. Did they not know the saying that “Those who are kind benefit themselves?” If they had looked after their colleagues and buried their corpses, maybe I would have spared them.

The four assassins that had stepped into the clearing appeared worn-out. They must have come all this way in considerable fear of further traps. Hesitant whether they should proceed with caution or swiftness, they walked towards the center, where they looked around in surprise after discovering the footprints suddenly stopped. A wild animal would have run away the moment it realized this. Anyone who could not do that and stopped in their tracks was at the mercy of the predator’s fangs. And since all four of them had tried to kill us in the forest, I was going to apply those laws of nature to them.

Suddenly, an arrow pierced one of the men's back. The man who was shot let out a scream before falling onto the ground, probably realizing that it was covered in lethal poison.

The remaining three discovered me as they looked up into the trees with their now pale faces. They actually decided to come straight at me. They shot an arrow, which I easily dodged by hiding behind the tree before jumping down at the right timing. As I jumped down, I tightly grasped a rope made out of vines, which was connected via the shortest route through the branches of nearby trees to a large loop extended on the ground. Even though I was still a child, using my body weight to pull at the rope led to the loop closing in and rounding up all three of them at once.

Taking aim at the assassins who were now bundled together like a stack of firewood, I fired off a precise shot. I intended to follow up with two more arrows, but even they were not that slow. One of them had immediately taken out a dagger to cut the rope.

As I ran towards my next trap, all three of them followed me vigorously, albeit one of them with a pale face from the poisoned arrow. They ran quite fast, assuming there was no further danger with me running ahead of them. Considering the gap in stamina between them and me, they probably would have caught up with me rather quickly at this pace.

In order to avoid that fate, I cut the ivy that I had wrapped around a tree earlier as I passed next to it. One end of the ivy disappeared up into the tree, giving way to a short but thick log swinging down in front of me. The log itself was repurposed from a decaying fallen tree. I had fixed it high above the ground so that it would accelerate and come crashing down like a pendulum. Of course, I had managed to step to the side just in time, but it was too late for the assassins, who were following me at full speed.

“What?!”

With a scream, the person in front threw himself to the ground to avoid the impact. Admittedly, I was impressed by my enemy's quick reflexes. However, the next in line, who had to act in an even shorter window, did not follow suit. He was hit in the chest and sent flying backwards, knocking over the person

behind him too. Neither of these two got back up again.

The pendulum log was more destructive than I had thought. Just in case, I had stuck a poisoned arrow at the tip of the log, but it seemed like that was not really necessary. While the third person that got knocked over had received some protection from the human shield in front of him, he did not get up either, probably because of the poisoned arrow from earlier. *Only one left.*

The final assassin was still lying on the ground, dumbfounded at his colleagues' demise. After slowly standing up, he gave me a spiteful look.

"I'll make you pay for this."

I laughed scornfully at his cliched line. "I am ready to forgive you." *That is, if you cry and apologize to your target, give Lord Itsuki all the information he needs, and willingly cooperate with all our demands after that.*

Laying out my conditions to him, the man's face turned bright red in fury. "What a load of rubbish! Are you making fun of me?"

"I think those conditions are quite fair for someone who suddenly showed up to kill us."

Besides, it felt appropriate to make fun of six assassins who had tried to surprise-kill ten-year-old children but ended up having the tables turned on themselves.

Hearing my logical and convincing explanation, the man showed more and more indignation. It appeared that he had rejected my peace offering. What a shame. Really, a pity.

"I guess you do not want me to forgive you, then..." It was such a pity that I started to smile. "I will more than happily oblige with revenge."

While I knew neither Arthur nor the assassin's circumstances, the same could be said for the guy in front of me. He had pursued me without knowing a thing about me. So why should I have to deliberate the circumstances of a fellow like him? I did not want to lose a talented person who was willing to help me achieve my absurd and reckless dreams. Much less did I want her to be killed by someone who did not even appreciate her talents. I could not bear that thought. I would rather snatch her away myself.

Accordingly, I confronted him with a declaration of war. “Let me be clear. My desire will poison you to death.”

Before my opponent could move, I jumped into the tall grass behind me to hide.

“Damn, you coward! Don’t go hiding again!”

That’s funny coming from the likes of you.

They were the ones who had chosen to bring the fight to my home ground. They had their own reasons for pursuing us. Just like we had our own reasons for trying to drive them away. The fight had started on equal footing, so there was no reason to blame their failures on me.

As I was hiding in the grass, I pulled on a previously-prepared vine, which led to a smaller tree further away. Since that was all there was to this contraption, it only produced a rustling sound by shaking that tree. Although it was worth mentioning that the small tree was placed just in the right spot for a clear shot from my current position.

Lured by the rustling sound, the final assassin approached the tree. At that moment, I quietly drew my bow and shot my final arrow. While listening to the ensuing screams and jeers, I secretly withdrew. I did not feel the need at all to make use of my holy hunting dagger in this hunt.

After informing the girl that it was over, I left the rest to the adults, like a good kid. I gave a rundown of the events to Sir George, who had arrived in support after hearing what had happened from Lady Maika. I helped out a little bit before spending the rest of the evening quietly eating dinner.

Luckily, none of the students had noticed the commotion caused by me and Sir George. Given that we were going to vacate the campsite and embark on another day-and-a-half long march to the city tomorrow, they were probably more tired than curious. As the sun set, everyone crawled back to their tents.

As for me, I tried making some smoked meat with the leftovers. While I was also tired, I managed to pull through to avoid having to eat dried meat and hard-baked biscuits again starting tomorrow. *If only this place was further*

industrialized...

I decisively looked up at the night sky. I decided to develop preserved meals once the industrial development plan was set in motion and the technology for processed packaging had reached a certain standard. It appeared that the beautiful, sparkling stars gave me their blessing. *How romantic to wish upon the stars. Although it's a bit smoky.*

While I was looking up at the sky surrounded by the smell of smoked meat, the girl quietly approached me.

"Ash, do you have a moment?"

"Yes, of course."

She stood nearby with a calm yet guilty look on her pretty face. Considering what had happened to her today, I could not blame her for having complicated feelings.

"Should we go somewhere else?" I proposed.

"Yeah, that's probably better, if you don't mind."

"How about we go enjoy the cool air near the river?"

Near the riverbed, where the trees cleared up, the stars were shining even brighter. Even the moon, which you could not see from the campsite, was reflecting on the water surface.

After looking at the moon for a short while, I decided to break the silence. Since it must have been difficult for her to start the conversation, I came up with some bland line.

"The moon is beautiful tonight."

"It really is," she reacted to my simple expression with a brief affirmation before hesitantly continuing, "It is thanks to you that I'm able to see the moon tonight."

Hearing her express her gratitude for saving her life, I told her not to worry about it, "You are a precious friend who helps me in a lot of ways; it's the least I could do."

“You still call me a friend?” she asked in a slightly shaky voice.

I see. It would not have been strange for me to hate her after my life was put in danger because of her pursuers. But I did not feel that way at all.

“Of course you are still my friend. I do not remember you doing anything that would make me hate you. On the contrary, you make me like you even more.”

My smile appeared to take her breath away for a moment before she hastily covered up her face and looked downwards. “You shouldn’t say that so casually. You should be aware of how impactful your words can be.”

“Do you think so? But I am truly happy that you have helped me work towards my dreams. And we have spent quite some time together ever since we met. Would you not say it is normal for me to like you?”

“You’re doing it again!”

She was talking with her face turned away, only catching fleeting glimpses of me. As our eyes met and I smiled, she somehow got angry.

“Are you even listening?!”

It sounded like she was embarrassed by my straightforward affection. Admittedly, it had been a bit cheesy.

“Anyway, for the time being, you do not have to worry about anything. You have helped me out in so many different ways. Today I managed to pay you back for that. Even if it was just a tiny fraction of my debt,” I told her.

As I always said, kindness repays kindness. And she had shown me a great amount of kindness. She may have been thinking that she did not do anything that was worth putting my life on the line for her, but that was just her point of view. According to my criteria, her kindness had been more than enough to warrant today’s efforts. Or she could consider it an advance for all the kindness that she was surely going to show me from here on out, if that suited her better. Besides, in this world putting your life on the line was almost a daily occurrence. Therefore, it really was not a big deal, but from her point of view, I was the one that was too kind.

“You’re too kind, Ash.” Her voice sounded brittle, as if it was going to break at

any moment. “Even though I haven’t told you anything about me. You don’t even know my name. And yet you’re so kind... to a liar like me...”

A tear flowed from her eyes. At first, I thought it was just a single one, but then it was followed by another, and yet another, until there was a small river running down her cheeks. I wondered for how long she had held in those tears.

As honest as she was, she must have suffered from keeping up the lie. As patient as she was, she must have desperately resisted the urge to expose her true self. As curious as she was, she must have resented not being able to do what she really wanted.

Under the light of the beautiful moon, her tears did not stop. I could not bear to look straight at that painful scene.

“You know, I like lies,” I said.

An ad-lib complaint towards reality rushed out of my mouth.

“I mean, would you not agree that reality is too cruel? If you are born as a poor farmer in a poor village, there are not many fun things in your life. Reality does not really provide you with any motivation to keep on moving forward each day.”

Until I turned eight, I lived as if I were dead already. Imagining what I had looked like from the outside led to feelings of shame and resentment that showed themselves through my wry smile.

“I am only alive right now thanks to lies. I survived by clinging onto fun and kind made-up stories where the suffering is always resolved.”

I was deeply grateful to Mrs. Yuika for reading aloud that story on that fateful day. Ever since then, I had been able to somehow enjoy life even in a cruel world like this. At the very least, my life was good enough that I wanted to help anyone who was crying in front of me.

“So it does not matter to me that you lied. I am sure that lie was necessary for you to live your life.” She should not have been blamed or hated for that lie. “And if you have managed to survive thanks to that lie, then I like it. You should treasure it even more than reality or the truth.”

The crying of the girl under the moonlight now turned into loud sobbing. I had failed as a gentleman. I could not even comfort her.

“I am sorry. I am not really good at finding the right words in these situations...” Not knowing what to do, I became flustered.

In response, she just shook her head while crying her eyes out. “Tha... not... it... I’m gla... you don’t... hate me...”

“Of course I do not hate you. How could I? You help me work towards my dreams. You are a dear friend now and from here on out.”

“Ash... thank... you...”

If that’s all you want, I’ll be your friend however and whenever you want, but please, stop crying...

I suppressed my impulse to run away. I wondered how many minutes I had spent watching her cry now.

Finally, her sobs died down to a sniffle. She then discreetly waved me over.

“Yes?”

As our faces drew closer together, she seemed to remember that her face was wet from crying. Embarrassed, she turned her face away.

“U-Uhm... I was told not to tell anyone, but... you’re special. I owe my life to you...” After coming up with an excuse to share her secret with me, she softly whispered into my ear, “My... real name is...”



The camping trip had included an unexpected hunting event, but we had managed to come back without leaving anyone behind. We even brought back a large prey, so you could say that it was in fact a huge success.

After several days, the exhausted students also got back to zealously studying for the sake of their futures. I was no exception. Once I had gotten back into my daily routine, I worked vigorously towards the implementation of both the agriculture and the industrial development plan. If I dare say so myself, I was busy to the point of feeling dizzy, but as a result of the camping trip, I had even more work to do. After all, I had to look after the large prey we had caught during the sudden hunting event.

“Good morning. Thank you for your service.”

I greeted the guard standing in front of the room at the back of the count’s mansion. He was one of Sir George’s subordinates who had accompanied us on the camping trip.

“How is our guest doing?” I asked.

“He is awake, but still doesn’t speak a word. He doesn’t look as pale anymore, so it looks like he’s getting better.”

“I see. So I can assume that the antidote is working, then.”

I was glad to hear that. For the time being, my objective was to not let our prey die.

“However, because of that he may also attack you, so please be careful when approaching him,” the guard warned me.

“Yes, I will watch out.”

Every hunter knew that there was nothing more ferocious than wounded prey.

Bracing myself, I opened the door. The room with blocked windows was dark and bleak, but clean. The bed, which was the only piece of furniture, was quite lavish. At the very least it was much more expensive and imposing than mine back home at the village. Tied to that bed for surveillance was one of the assassins that had been caught in our trap during the training camp.

After repelling all the enemies, I had brought along Sir George to collect the bodies, but found one of them was still breathing. We treated him and brought him back with us. It was the assassin who had lost his right eye to the tree trap. Apparently, he had not been poisoned too badly, so the antidote still worked. What a streak of luck! As a result, we were given an opportunity to gain information on who had sent him.

“Hello, it is time for your daily check-up!”

Greeting him with a merry voice, I looked at the face of the man whose four limbs were tied to the bed. It was a model sour look!

“There you go again, making sour faces. I have heard you are still not giving up any information. Are you not happy with the guarantee that we will let you live the rest of your life if you talk?”

I tried making conversation, but the man still did not look like he wanted to talk at all. Was that appropriate behavior towards the nice boy who treated him? I wished he would have let me examine him with a slightly friendlier attitude.

Regardless, this was an important task, so I could not just do it half-heartedly. I had become quite good at concocting lethal poison, but I still did not have much experience counteracting it. Fortunately, I had never poisoned myself with my own poison up to now.

“Oh? Looks like the swelling on your face has gone down quite a bit. Hm... You still have a fever. Nonetheless, you are getting better each day. Are you experiencing any other symptoms?”

While taking notes, I asked him about his well-being, but the man did not break his silence. What an uncooperative test subject.

“You should at least tell me how you are feeling. Otherwise, I cannot treat you properly.”

“I didn’t ask you to treat me at all.” He laughed scornfully while making a throwaway remark.

However, I did not see what was funny about this situation.

“Why are you stating the obvious?” Why should I have had to comply with my test subject’s wishes? “I am asking you to please let me treat you. I do not care if you want to receive treatment or not. I want to cure you.”

As I smiled from the bottom of my heart while informing him about my desire to heal him, my test subject’s sour face slightly faltered.

“Oh, did you understand? Yes, I am in fact really looking forward to healing you.”

So much so that I had even temporarily halted my precious other plans. So much so that I burst into laughter by myself when looking through the list of poisonous plants and medicinal herbs that I had received from Mr. Quid.

“After all, if you keep refusing to give us any information, you are going to become mine.”

“Do you plan on making me your slave?”

“By no means! I already have enough people helping me with my work. And even if I did not, you alone would not really make a difference.”

Belgo and the prisoners were there to help me with simple tasks. I did want to build a highway and cultivate new plots of land, but a single slave would have been of no use.

“Besides, a slave? Only humans can become slaves. Do you still consider yourself a human?” He seemed dumbfounded by this unexpected question. “You committed the serious crime of trying to harm the count’s son. Under normal circumstances, you would have already been executed. You are only alive and receiving medical care because there is important information stored inside your head.” *Do you realize what that means?*

I lightly tapped his head. There was no reply. Maybe the information pretended to be out.

“If by any chance you do not have any information... Or if you do not want to give it up... There is no value in letting you live. You would just be a corpse that is not dead yet.”

And who would have wanted a rotting corpse as a slave? It would have been a

waste of a burial fee.

“However, to me, a corpse that is not dead yet is extremely valuable.”

After all, it still had the reactions of a living body. In other words, if you injected it with poison, you could check what effects it had, how they presented themselves, and how long they lasted.

“Do you know what anesthesia is? It is an agent from the ancient civilization which temporarily removes a human’s sense of pain. You could say it is a very strong painkiller. If I use anesthesia, even cutting open your stomach will not hurt.”

I slowly traced the abdomen of the restrained man. It felt revolting doing it to a bastard like him. Personally, I would have liked to trace the abdomen of a beautiful woman. However, I chose not to express these thoughts and instead passionately talked about the greatness of anesthesia.

“If we had anesthesia, we would be able to treat seriously injured patients who are currently doomed! We could also start treating patients with diseases of unknown origins. After all, it would allow us to perform surgery, cutting open their bodies.”

Without anesthesia, the only way to perform surgery was to hold down the patient as they writhed in pain. This may have been feasible for small cuts into the arms or so, but no human would have let their stomach be cut open like a fish. And if the patient did not stay still, it was easy to miss one’s aim and hard to look at the affected parts. The bleeding was stronger and there was a higher probability of unnecessary wounds. Or to put it differently, they were likely to die. That was the reason why the concept of surgery did not currently exist.

As a result, if, for example, a broken bone pierced through the skin of a patient, it was not possible to put it back, leading to a permanently bent bone. That was if the patient did not die from a festering wound first. It was a shame how many lives were lost to a mere bone fracture. The world still held a lot of empty space to house more humans. That was why anesthesia was necessary. Anesthesia alone may not have solved everything, but without it, nothing would start. Accordingly, I had always aimed to bring back anesthesia, so I would be able to perform surgery on myself and the people around me in case of injury

and illness.

“But it is not that simple! The main ingredient of anesthesia is poison! And pretty deadly poison as well! If you use too much, the patient will die, and even if you find the right dose, it comes with side effects that can make you sick. It would be scary to test that on myself or the people around me.”

So scary that I had not done it. I had experimented on my guinea pigs, but naturally the dosage was completely different. While I did calculate the weight proportions and came up with different variants, it was impossible to know if they worked until I tested them on a human.

Having explained this much without taking a breath, I took a moment to look down on the restrained man. His face had turned pale. It appeared that he had guessed my plans for him from the direction my explanation was taking. As expected from a corpse that had not died yet. See? There was a proper human reaction. That was important.

“I will repeat myself. I am asking you to please let me treat you. I do not care if you want to receive treatment or not. I want to cure you.” *No matter how much you cry that you object, I will provide you with the best possible care in all sincerity.* “After all, if you happened to turn into a dead corpse, I would no longer be able to perform any experiments.”

Having received the official seal of approval from the acting count for human experiments, I could not consciously let this precious life go to waste.

I showed an affectionate smile to my test subject. “Do not worry. While the experiments may be dangerous, I will not do anything that risks killing you right away. At first, I will administer a small amount of anesthesia that will definitely keep you alive. However, since that also means that you will retain most of your sense of pain, I will not perform any pain sensitivity tests at this stage. Maybe I will poke you a bit with a needle or something.”

My test subject started sweating profusely. What a worrywart. In order to reassure him, I continued my explanation even more seriously. “Of course, the amount of anesthesia will increase with each experiment, and accordingly, your senses will become more numb. At that point, I will have to cut open various parts of your body as if I was performing surgery.”

This part of the explanation just made it sound like a grotesque experiment coming from a mad scientist. Understandably, my test subject's anxiety went through the roof.

In complete reversal, I showed a bright smile. As animals living in groups, humans instinctively relaxed when seeing a smile. "However, please rest assured. At the same time, I will conduct experiments on the technique of stitching and put you back together. I will make sure that your wounds close and heal properly. I will also take utmost care of hygiene. I promise you I will do my best to keep you alive." *Isn't that a conscientious experiment?*

The possibilities ranged from dying after a single test to surviving and moving on to the next one.

The test subject's anxiety morphed into full-blown despair, skyrocketing even further.

"Judging from your expression, I assume you understand what that means. Unfortunately, there is also the possibility that you will die due to my poor ability." One should not lie, so I told him the honest truth. "But even in the unlikely event that you do die, your sacrifice will not be in vain. After your death, I will carefully and respectfully cut open and dissect every bit of your body. This will allow me to observe the thickness of your veins, the flexibility of your muscles, the spread and the color of your nerves, as well as the placement and structure of your internal organs. Generally speaking, I will disassemble and document everything without exception. And that is not all! After scraping off all the flesh, your skeleton will forever become a model for medical science."

As I swore to the three gods that I would not let a single bone go to waste, the test subject got watery eyes. Did my passionate speech move him to tears? This proved how important it was to talk with all one's heart.

"In that case, your noble sacrifice would surely result in your name becoming renowned. However, you refuse to even tell us your own name... Well, you do not have to. All you need to do is let me perform my experiments on you."

There must have been some kind of duty to confidentiality due to the nature of his job. While he was an assassin, he was still a human. If he had any family, he probably did not want to sully their name. In that case, I just had to give him

an alias. That was good enough to record his devotion for posterity.

“Let me give you a name that has been passed down in my family to all those who offered their life for the development of science.” *What number am I on again? Ah, right.* “Starting today, your name will be Guinea Pig 57. I imagine the 56 rats who helped me in my experiments before you would be highly pleased too.”

The test subject—or I should say, Guinea Pig 57—was so moved that he was shaking and crying. It warmed my heart to see how pleased he was.

With that warm feeling in my chest, I asked Guinea Pig 57 for a favor. “I went through great pains to draw up an experiment plan that will last for five or ten years. So, could you please continue to keep your mouth shut? Please do not tell us who sent you here.”

I finished today’s visit with these polite and kind words of enthusiasm.

One hour later, Lord Itsuki called me to tell me that Guinea Pig 57 had told him everything he knew.

After the assassin who was supposed to become Guinea Pig 57 had talked, Lord Itsuki was in an extremely good mood.

“Good work, Ash! Your threats were very effective. Naturally, I will have to double-check the information, but it didn’t look like he was lying.”

“I am glad everything went well. I was nervous.”

Of course, my earlier behavior was all just an act. As someone who aimed to be a conscientious gentleman with common sense, there was no way that I would have condoned such practices spitting in the face of humanity. However...

“I did not mean to frighten him... Maybe he was surprisingly cowardly?”

To make it sound scary, I did think up lines that sounded like they could have come from a crazy, high-achieving, bloodthirsty killer. Honestly, though, I had not expected a professional assassin to falter from a single interaction like that. Did people like him not come prepared to die for their job?

“Well, he was not so much an assassin, but rather a spy who also engages in

dirtier work,” Lord Itsuki explained.

“So you are saying that he has less courage than professional assassins?”

“I’d say it’s a matter of degree, but you got the right idea.”

Nonetheless, someone like him should have been more resolved to keep information concealed. I was suspicious of his loose tongue, but I did have an explanation for it.

“I guess it is not too strange to become mentally unstable in his situation. He lost all his colleagues, his body is weakened from the poison, and he finds himself confined in a dark room.”

“It’s all thanks to your judgment. You said we should press him for answers before he recovers.” After laughing loudly, Lord Itsuki added in a lower voice, “But the guard was also scared of you, so it probably wouldn’t have made much of a difference.”

“Haha, that is a good joke,” I laughed.

There was no way that an intelligent and gentle child like me, who would not even hurt a fly, could have scared one of Lord Itsuki’s adult allies too.

“Uh...”

Lord Itsuki, you should look people in the eyes when talking! Otherwise, you’ll make them sad thinking that you’re avoiding them!

“Anyway! Ash, I really can’t thank you enough this time. We still need to await the actual results, but it looks like *her* position will improve considerably with the information that we’ve obtained.”

Hearing those words come from Lord Itsuki, I first felt an immense sense of relief, followed by a sense of satisfaction.

“I am happy to hear that.”

“Let me thank you as a representative of the Count of Sacula’s family. We are indebted to you and we will never forget your meritorious deed.”

The acting count expressed gratitude as a representative of his family. Since he could not make the circumstances regarding her situation public yet, he

could not go into any further details. This probably translated to him saying, “We will reward you sometime in the future, so please wait for now.”

Part of me was counting my chickens before they hatched, but at the same time, I also hesitated to receive a reward from the count’s family.

“Thank you for your kind words. However, I only acted to save my friend. How should I put it...?”

I managed to save a precious friend and deepen our bond. The fact that she was going to keep being a good friend of mine was already rewarding enough to me. I did not need anything more from anyone else.

“...Having my friend back is all that I need. It would be a bit greedy to ask for anything more... Do not worry too much about owing me a debt or my meritorious deed this time.” *But only this time around. This is a one-off. Starting next time, I won’t mind receiving a reward for every single deed.*

As I looked up with a serious expression, Lord Itsuki’s face resembled that of a leader of a bunch of rascals joining his friends. Was that the face of a statesman facing a subordinate? I was most definitely sure it was not.

“How tactless of me! Please forgive me, Ash!”

“A-Ah... Yes, I do not mind at all.”

“You’re absolutely right! It’s inappropriate to think about getting a reward for protecting your friend! You don’t need anything like that to help your friends! I know, I know. Bahaha.” He boastfully laughed, facing towards the ceiling.

Hmm, I see.

Somehow, Lord Itsuki’s switch had been flipped. At work, he tried to be a composed statesman, but he just was not able to hide his affinity for hard work, friendship, and victories.

“Right. Today’s a wonderful day! Ash, would you mind joining me tonight? I’ll call Baleas too, and we can have a men’s night out!”

He was asking me out in such a cheerful way that it was almost impossible to refuse. Not that I would have had any reasons to refuse in the first place, so I just accepted.

“If it is alright with you, I would be happy to join you.”

“Yeah! Let’s drink until sunrise!”

That night we ended up trying out various establishments across the city, which eventually led to one of us drinking themselves under the table at one of the guard lodging houses. That person was neither me nor Sir George.

While shouldering the passed-out acting count, Sir George showed a resigned yet delightful smile. “Since you were here today, it was much easier to deal with him than usual. I’ll count on you joining us next time too.”

It appeared Lord Itsuki himself also had a great friend.

After the recent events, Lord Arthur’s reputation and social standing improved with each passing day. While Lord Itsuki could not give me many details regarding the situation, he relayed information as needed. According to him, it was to alleviate my concerns for my friend.

As summer passed by and it felt more like fall day by day, Lord Arthur’s problems at the capital seemed to be heading towards resolution. At the same time, Lord Arthur’s expression became gloomier, just like the sun that was losing its strength in the face of fall.

Wondering what was weighing on her mind, I received the answer one day, when she came back to our dormitory room. Around that time, winter’s footsteps could already be heard in the distance.

“I’ve got to go back to the capital.” She spoke with tear-filled eyes in front of the closed door.

“...I see.” That was my answer.

I had anticipated this turn of events. Considering the meaning of her real name, she could not have stayed here forever. No matter whether the trouble got resolved or not, her presence was needed as a balancing weight in the capital. It was incredibly unfortunate that I had to part with such a brilliant and talented person.

I let out a sigh, thinking I was about to lose contact with her.

Lord Arthur's slender shoulders shook in surprise. "I-I'm sorry...!" she apologized with teary eyes. "I can't believe I won't be able to repay you for saving my life... I told them I wanted to stay here, but they wouldn't listen." Holding one hand to her temple she shook her head.

That doesn't surprise me. In your position, that's out of the question.

As a person of reason, I felt compelled to comfort her. I did not want her to start crying again. "There is no need to apologize. Your desire to stay here is already more than enough." *So please don't cry, okay? Otherwise, my gentleman experience points will decrease.*

"Y-You're not angry?"

"Me? Angry? At you?"

On the opposite, I was bursting with feelings of guilt and kindness towards a girl who was about to cry. There was no room for anger.

"I mean... you said you saved me because you wanted me to help... So I thought I should put my life on the line helping you to repay you for risking your life for me."

"Please do not put your life on the line that casually!"

I could say that with confidence as someone who had risked their own life about once a year for the past three years.

However, my statement had not been as persuasive as I assumed, since her face went from almost crying to grimacing.

"Well, you're the one who risked your own life first..."

"Yes, that is exactly why I said it. I guess that advice comes from my own experience."

Lord Arthur glared at me, not looking convinced at all.

Let's change the subject. "In any case, I am not angry. However, I think it is unfortunate that we cannot be together forever."

"F-Forever...?"

"Yes, forever."

Lord Arthur's face turned bright red after hearing my reassuring answer. "I-I'm not going to get tricked again! Y-You mean as friends, of course! Right?!"

"Yes, as friends... When did I ever trick you?"

I did not remember ever doing anything so disgraceful in my whole life! Not even once!

"Just as I thought! Everything's fine... Y-Yeah, I'm glad to hear you say that, I think."

"You really are a brilliant person. If you stayed by my side, I am sure you would have helped me with many things. Considering that, I cannot help but feel disappointed."

"Yeah... I also think it would've been much more fun to spend time with you. It's really frustrating." The curious girl smiled as if she were talking about a pleasant dream. "And... even more so, it feels very lonely." Her smile could not mask her urge to break out into tears.

It seemed that she had very much enjoyed the time spent with a hopeless oddball like me. In that case, there was no need for me to hold back in making a demand.

What demand? Naturally, regarding our future cooperation. I was not going to let a brilliant human resource like her get away without doing anything about it.

"In that case, I know just the right person that can help you drive your loneliness away."

It was a perfect match. This may have been divine guidance.

I took out the letters that Mr. Quid regularly brought me back from the capital. "Do you remember Father Folke, my teacher who went to the capital last year?"

Seeing a big smile come over my face, her teary expression gave way to a perplexed look. "Y-Yeah, the person deciphering the ancient language."

"Yes, precisely. The middle-aged delinquent, shut-in priest deciphering ancient language."

“I think you’re the only one calling him that.”

And that had been me toning it down for the sake of the well-brought-up Lord Arthur. Usually, I was much franker with Father Folke himself, who did not hold back either. I only repaid his good manners with mine.

“It seems that Father Folke’s studies in the capital are coming along nicely, and he has been making friends with various interesting research fellows.”

It was not just ancient language researchers, either. There were natural historians and medical scientists among them too. My first reaction upon hearing that was that I wanted to go to the capital right away.

“I would love for you to talk to Father Folke and his research fellows once you get back to the capital.”

“Yeah, of course. I can just talk to them...” She tilted her head as if to say, “Are you sure you don’t want me to do anything else?”

“It is not just talking to them. It is *you* who is talking to them. You, who studied alongside me and helped me make various things. Someone as brilliant as you.”

Lord Arthur knew very well what it was that I needed right now. And she knew what it was that I wanted to do moving forward. That was precisely why I wanted her specifically to talk to researchers who had access to all the knowledge stored in the capital.

“I am sure you will have many conversations with them that would make me jealous. And I am certain you will learn things that I am dying to know.”

It felt as if I had obtained my other self—my clone—that I had jokingly wished for in the past. And, coincidentally, my other self was going to the capital. Truly wonderful. The time that I had spent together with her now made it possible to fulfill this pipe dream of mine. Not a single thing had been in waste.

“All you have to do is talk to them. However, your brilliance and your experience helping me out will turn those conversations into crystals of valuable knowledge.”

I tightly grasped the hand of my precious, precious friend.

“Please continue to talk to me like this even after going to the capital. While your voice may not be able to reach this far, your writing will. Please keep talking to me through letters. Let me know what interesting new things you have learned at the capital. I will read your letters at the temple together with everyone else. It will be as if you were there with us doing research again.”

Of course, I was also going to write her letters. I was going to tell her about new projects I started with my friends, what shapes they were taking, what direction they were going, and how fast they were coming along. I wanted to share with her what new things I acquired, and what new things I wanted. I wished to let her hear my laughing voice.

“So please keep saving me going forward. Please keep lending me your help.”

If she wanted to repay me for what I had done, that was more than enough. After all, while it sounded easy, I knew more than anyone else how absurdly bothersome, plain, and endlessly long that path was. But that was what helping with my dream entailed.

If I had not been in despair at the state of this world, I would not have chased after such a reckless dream myself. Therefore, if she was prepared to agree to my request and follow me into such a dangerous dreamland, then I declared to abide by the phrase “Kindness repays kindness.”

“I see...” Her smile resembled the sun rays after the rain, driving away the darkness. “...I’ll be able to keep helping you.”

“Of course.” I resolved myself and reciprocated her smile. “I will always want your help. Please do not forget that.”

As long as you’re offering your help, I’ll go anywhere I need to accept it. And I’ll kick away anything that tries to get in my way.

Arthur’s Perspective

It was that time of the year when strong winds blew over Sacula. At last, the day of my departure had come.

In the morning, I got dressed in a dreamlike and fuzzy state. First, I went to see our dorm supervisor, Mrs. Rihn, who had helped me both openly and

secretly after coming to this town. Yes, I had to call her Mrs. Rihn now—I could not be too familiar with the leading maid of another family. Of course, I had not yet departed, so I still needed to take care out in public, but now I was alone with her.

“Thank you so much for everything. Your assistance was very reassuring, Mrs. Rihn.”

“I am glad that I was able to support you with the little that I could do.”

After formally bowing at the proper angle, just like she did when we first met, she went on to say something that was not proper at all.

“But this doesn’t feel right.”

It was nothing big, but it was unusual to hear the strict and serious maid point this out with a smile on her face.

“I’m standing here in front of a student whom I looked after for the past two years at this dormitory. So please, keep calling me ‘Rihn.’”

I caught my breath seeing her smile, which I had almost never seen in the past two years.

Was it really okay to call her “Rihn”? That way of calling her was a representation of the very limited time that I had spent with her as Arthur. It didn’t belong to me—it belonged to Arthur, who was about to leave.

“But...”

“There is no ‘but.’ I don’t know what it’s like at the royal capital, but here you are in the remote region of Sacula. Different manners and etiquette apply under the rule of the Count. As the dormitory supervisor, I looked after you as a member of the military academy. It may only have been two years, but that relationship will live on forever.” Her face lit up with a cordial smile. “With all due respect, I don’t feel comfortable with a naughty child who secretly eats tomatoes being so formal all of a sudden. So please, keep calling me ‘Rihn.’”

It was not like the strict maid to be so irrational. However, I also felt a familiar warmth radiating from the dorm supervisor earnestly carrying out her job.

“Yeah... Thanks, Rihn.”

Our relationship, which was only supposed to last for two years, had been freed from the constraints of time.

Next, I visited the temple. I was especially grateful towards Mother Yae. Whenever I failed to keep up with Ash and Maika, she was the one who sat beside me and helped.

“Mother Yae, thank you so much for teaching me so many things.”

“I’m glad you feel that way. But you don’t have to mention it.”

The intelligent priest, who looked prettier by the day, had her beautiful face light up with a passionate look.

“I am a priest, and you were a student who enthusiastically pursued knowledge. The gates of the temple are always open to someone like you. Here in Sacula as well as in the royal capital. Don’t ever forget that.”

She then proceeded to hand me over a dozen envelopes.

“What are these, Mother Yae?”

“I guess you could say they are letters of recommendation certifying your high expertise. If you show them to the people at the temple in the capital, you should be able to receive an adequate reception. This should be all you need. For the rest, you should be able to make the necessary connections by yourself.”

The sealing wax showed the Count of Sacula’s family crest. It was not the one used by the acting count or count himself, but it was of equal formality and the highest-ranked seal she could have used. In other words, these envelopes didn’t just represent the authority of the Church, but they also wore the authority of the count on the outside. They were like a master swordsman carrying a weapon made by a famous artisan.

“Mother Yae, aren’t you going to get in trouble for this?”

To my surprise, Mother Yae showed a mischievous smile. I could almost hear her saying, “Oh, did you notice?”

“Yes, I could possibly get into trouble.”

The Church cautioned against the open cooperation of religious authorities and political authorities such as the nobility. This was because, historically, the nobles had used the power of the Church to obtain tyrannical profit.

“However, this is innocent compared to what those guys from the capital are prepared to do.”

“But I don’t want to cause you any trouble...”

“Are you in any position to say that?” The intellectual priest showed a beautiful yet terrifying hunter’s expression. “Ash told me that you are going to help him with his research at the capital.”

I faltered after hearing the facts laid out to me.

“I’m sure Ash will not say anything if you only report to him every once in a while. He is not the type of person to go hard on other people.”

She’s right. That makes him even more...

“However, you’re different. You’ll mind a lot if you only report to Ash sporadically. So much so that your food will get stuck in your throat.”

My chest hurt from being pointed out the truth. She may have been right. No, she was definitely right.

“You should make use of everything at your disposal. For your own sake. And mine.” Mother Yae expressed her selfish desires with a lovely smile. “If it’s easier for you to act in the capital, ultimately that will help out Ash. And if you can manage to help Ash, he will probably also help me in return. I’m so close to winning over Baleas’ heart.”

Before I knew it, she had started calling the person to whom she had referred as “Sir George” when we first met by his first name.

“So don’t feel like you have to hold back. It’s also for the sake of my romance.”

She was upfront about her feelings. My admiration manifested itself as a wry smile. Sir George must have been one lucky guy to have such strong feelings directed towards him.

“From my point of view, it looks like you’re also in no position to choose your

methods,” Mother Yae interrupted my thoughts with another warning. “If you have no choice but to get separated, you have to make sure to stay on his mind. It’s not *you* who should be irritated by the distance, but you have to make *him* feel frustrated that you are far apart.”

“What are you talking about...?” I felt like the conversation was moving in a different direction.

In response to my bewilderment, Mother Yae drew closer and whispered into my ear. Not as a priest, but as a woman. “Given my position, I should probably be rooting for Maika, but after spending so much time studying with you, I also want to support your romantic feelings. In a way, I’m also in a position where I’m sort of stealing someone’s romantic partner.”

Looking away, I felt my face flush at once after receiving this friendly yet teasing advice. “Wh-What do you mean?”

“I’m Lady Yuika’s younger cousin, and as a result, Maika’s blood relative... But above anything else, and just like you, I’m a woman who’s in love.”

She let me know that she had seen through my lie—my feelings were obvious to her.

“Love is another major discipline of life. If you ever need any advice, I’ll be there for you, my top disciple,” she added.

And that’s how, just around the time where I was supposed to leave this land, I was roped into a new relationship.

After saying goodbye to various people, I finally came to the count’s mansion. I had to say farewell to the most influential person currently in this region.

“I am sorry for causing the count’s family and, by extension, the Sacula region so much trouble during the past two years. I will never forget your kindness for as long as I live, Lord Itsuki.” I displayed the manners expected of someone of my rightful social status.

Lord Itsuki nodded with a demeanor befitting of an acting count. Somehow, I had anticipated this outcome. I had a feeling this was not going to be over that easily.

“I want you to start again.” Just as I had thought, Lord Itsuki spoke out with a serious expression on his face. “I am your older brother, and you are the youngest child of the house of Amanobe. You address me accordingly.”

I let the tension out of my shoulders. My eyebrows shamefully lowered.

Everyone here was like this. Even though I built a wall around me and distanced myself so as to not cause any trouble, they all came knocking on that wall, inviting me out to join them.

“Thank you, my dear brother Itsuki.”

Thanking him as my alter ego, he once again nodded. This time with the demeanor of a family member.

“That’s it! I’m sad to see my cute younger brother go away to the capital, but judging from your activity report from the military academy, I’m sure you’ll be able to flourish there as well.”

My dear brother paused for a moment. As a statesman, he always acted with a sullen face, but he now showed himself as a private individual.

“In the unlikely event that you end up disliking everything in the capital city, I want you to remember the time you spent here. When you come back, those guys will be delighted no matter what.”

I was surprised at the faces that came to my mind after hearing that statement. It was not just one or two people. I didn’t realize how many sparkling memories I carried inside of me. Memories that acted as a hearth driving away the cold. I had truly been accepted in this place.

“I’m glad I got to see that face,” my dear brother Itsuki said, and smiled as if he had seen a light inside the darkness. “I was the one who brought it up, but I admit I was slightly worried you were going to say that there are no such people.”

“Of course they exist!”

I was perplexed by my fiery, vehement response. But those were my honest feelings. It felt as if a flame from the bottom of my heart had consumed my body. Of course those people existed.

“Yeah, there will be many people who rejoice when you come back. And it will not be simply because of who you are, but because of the two years you spent together with them as Arthur. Don’t ever forget that.”

My very kind and gentle big brother proceeded to pat my head in a slightly rough manner.

After I had said farewell to my big brother, I was greeted by someone that I had not expected to meet here in the corridors of the mansion.

“Hey! Do you have a moment?”

Her bright, sun-like smile appeared extremely cute even to me.

“Sure, Maika. I’m almost done saying my goodbyes, and there’s nothing else left for me to do until my departure.”

“Let’s talk a bit, then.” Maika grabbed my hand.

“Where are we going?”

“To the guest room over there. That’s better than just standing in the hallway.”

I followed behind Maika as she pulled my hand. This casual behavior of hers filled me with emotion. She had always dragged me along like this. When Ash had already moved ahead by leaps and bounds by himself, and it felt like I was being left behind, she had extended her hand. When I had thought that maybe I should give up chasing after him, it was always her hand that brought me back. This was the last time I was going to be pulled along by her hand. I didn’t want to forget its warmth.

At that moment, I suddenly let go. We had already arrived at the guest room, which was deeply intertwined with my memories.

“Is this the place where...”

“Yeah, this is where we treated Ash’s serious injuries.”

A half-dead Ash was brought here after his fight with a werewolf. My hands trembled as I recalled how cold he had felt back then.

“I thought this would be a good place for us to talk,” Maika added.

Yeah, it didn’t look like she just wanted to say goodbye. She chose this place after all. It must have been something special and important.

“Let’s see...” After closing her eyelids for a brief moment, she looked me straight into the eyes. “I won’t call you ‘Arthur’ anymore.”

Her words mercilessly ripped through my lie, just like Ash’s words had done a while back. But I had changed since then. I was fine now. After all, she had already brought me down once. There was no point in trying to keep up the lie with her. That day when I had frozen, she had closely embraced me, so naturally she would have noticed.

“I’m sorry for lying to you,” I apologized.

“I don’t mind. It’s a bit inconvenient that I can’t call you by your name, but we are still friends. More importantly...” As she continued speaking, Maika just brushed off my secret. “There’s something else I want to talk to you about. Let’s talk about Ash.”

“Yeah, that’s indeed very important.”

He was the person that she liked, after all. *No that’s not right. That’s a dishonest way of putting it.* He was the person that we both liked. Naturally, she would have wanted to say a lot of things to the person who had shared a room with Ash for the past two years.

“First...”

Maika took a couple of deep breaths. It was a rhythm that I hadn’t heard before. Regardless, it was nothing strange considering she was about to rush into a state of tension different from our usual interactions.

“What do you like most about Ash?”

“Let’s see. It has to be his warm smile.”

My true thoughts had slipped through. Probably because I was always thinking about this. Whenever I looked at Ash and talked to him, I always thought how I liked his expression, so when she asked, this answer came out instantly.

“Right! I think so too! His smile sparkles brighter than the midday sun on a summer day!”

“Y-Yeah? I mean, that’s not it, Maika.”

“You don’t agree?”

“A-Ah, no, I do! But I didn’t just want to talk about his smile...”

“Ooh! There’s more than one thing that you like most about Ash! I get that! I also like how smart he is!”

“Yeah, that’s another one of his charm points. Personally, I also value how he can be a bit overbearing sometimes. But not in a bad way. It’s more like handing me a warm drink at times when I’m prone to holding back.”

“I know, right? It’s like a mature kindness... or maybe tolerance.”

“Yeah, it really makes me happy... Ah, but I’m getting off-topic again...” *Why are we talking about such embarrassing stuff?* “Listen, Maika. It might not be my place to say this, but don’t you have other things to tell me?”

“Would you prefer talking about Ash’s favorite food?”

“No, no, no! That’s not what I mean at all. Like, are you not angry that I like Ash?”

I had assumed that two girls who liked the same guy were only going to have serious arguments... But Maika just chuckled.

“I thought that you were probably worried about that. It’s so like you.” It was a pleasant laugh coming from the bottom of her heart. “I guess I’m jealous. Of course I want him to myself... But I also realize that he will be liked by many other people. He is the person I like after all,” Maika proudly said with an expression as if she were looking at the sun shining through a rift between the clouds after rainy weather. “Besides, I also realize very well how difficult it is to keep liking Ash. He is always nice and takes care of me, but he doesn’t notice my feelings.”

And her expression also showed that she was aware that the same sun was not just shining on herself, but illuminating the whole vast land. *Yeah, I know. I know what you’re going through, Maika.* It was a painful feeling creating a

burning jealousy, but yet I somehow liked it.

As I reflexively held my chest, I saw Maika do the same. She gently nodded to acknowledge our shared feeling.

“I understand that you have come to really like Ash as he is,” she said.

“I knew it was wrong and my feelings wouldn’t get answered, but still...”

Both our social standings. The distance between the capital and here. The expectations from my surroundings and his dreams. If I had kept being Arthur, then perhaps it would have been possible to take his hand, but for the real me, it was too far away to reach out.

The truth really wasn’t worth anything. If it were possible to keep being the fake me, I wouldn’t have minded my true self getting killed. That was how much I liked him. I was never going to be able to forget this feeling.

“There’s no use fighting the feeling, then. No one can stop it.” My rival in love, who carried the same feelings, showed a pretty smile. “That’s why I thought we should take this opportunity to tell each other what we like about Ash.”

“I see. That’s, how should I put it...” Just like Ash always behaved like Ash...
“It’s very much like you, Maika.”

“Really? Hehe, thanks.”

You immediately knew how much she liked Ash. It made me a bit jealous.

“But I’m not going to lose to you! While you’re away, I’m going to keep appealing to Ash with all I’ve got!” Maika added resolutely.

“I won’t stop you, but don’t you think that’s a bit unfair?”

It felt like I had a great handicap. While I didn’t even know whether I was ever going to meet Ash again—socially I probably wasn’t supposed to—Maika had no intention of slowing down at all.

“Not even a little bit! You’ve shared a room with him all this time! That’s unfair too!”

“That’s not the same?! You can’t compare that to me going to the capital! You were still in the same dormitory!”

“To me it’s the same!”

When it came to Ash, Maika really went all out. That was why I could trust her to take good care of him. If I had to choose someone to watch over Ash while I went away somewhere where my hand could no longer reach him, then there was no other choice than Maika.

“Alright. I’ll also try my best in the capital to impress Ash and make him grateful towards me,” I declared.

“Sure. And I’ll do my best here to help Ash,” Maika said on her part.

It was a promise between two love rivals. We pledged to both give our all to help the person we liked.

“Take good care of Ash. I know it will be difficult, but make sure to keep your eyes on him.”

“Leave it to me. You keep at it too. Ash is really looking forward to your trip to the capital.”

In the end, I made another promise that continued on to tomorrow.

Once again, Sir George and his subordinates were in charge of my protection on the way to the capital, just as they had been on my way here. And once again, no one was seeing me off, but that was to be expected. I shouldn’t have been here in the first place. Therefore, when leaving, I had to quietly take off so as to not leave behind any traces.

I’d be lying if I said I didn’t feel lonely. But considering the many important things that I had learned and received during my time here, I decided to endure the loneliness. Not out of necessity, but because I wanted to out of my own free will. As memories crossed my mind one by one, I tolerated the tightening pain that accompanied them. The memory of making my first friend. Drafting up a project plan with everyone. Tasting the warm tea with honey. The tears of my friends who didn’t hold back their emotions. Working all together on the model plane.

Holding back my emotions while recollecting all these things felt painful, but not cold. My restraint was like a stone wall protecting the warm, glistening fire

inside a hearth. It was a stove of restraint, where I kept my important memories burning. Alone inside the horse carriage, I held my chest as I rocked along to my memories.

“Excuse me, can I talk to you?”

Hearing a voice from the outside, I opened the window to find Sir George.

“Sir George, what is it?”

“I thought you might like to have a look at the city.”

I recalled having the same exchange two years ago.

“Ah, I see. Does that mean we are...”

“Yes, it’s the same spot as two years ago.”

We had arrived at the spot where I had first set eyes on Itsutsu.

In that case, I definitely wanted to see it. This may very well have been the last time I could look at it.

“Thank you. I’ll take you up on your offer.”

As I got out of the carriage, I was greeted by a strong wind. It was the same wind that had blown when I had arrived here. Pressing down my hair, I recalled the town where I had lived until this morning. I felt like the crooked and irregular city wall resonated with me. Most likely because my emotions were just as warped and all over the place.

“It was a wonderful town.”

My days there had been awkward, noisy, and strict, yet strangely marvelous and warm. All my worries were removed one by one, or rather burned to the ground in one go. It was one hell of a time. I was sure those days were going to turn into a light shining on my life moving forward.

As I squinted my eyes at this dazzling light, Sir George spoke to me in a low voice, so as to not disturb the fire inside of me. “As someone born and raised here, I am glad that you enjoyed your stay. This is exactly what those city walls have protected over the years.” Realizing that his low voice didn’t in fact disturb the fire, Sir George continued in a louder voice. “And if you ever feel the need,

please feel free to rely upon this rustic pride of ours. You have already become a part of the city that those walls are sworn to protect.”

“...Thank you.” *If only that were possible... I would have wanted to return there right away. Back to that room where he is staying.*

But unfortunately, I had to go. I had to carry the torch that he had entrusted me with all the way to the royal capital. In his place, I had to shine a light on the knowledge sleeping in the unknown darkness.

My chest felt hot. It felt like a copious amount of strength was flowing through me. It was strange. While my chest felt like it was going to burst open from loneliness at any moment, it wasn't cold at all. I was surprised at myself for not shaking even a little bit in the face of this strong wind signaling the coming of winter. Even though it was the same wind that I had lamented as violent two years ago, it felt completely different now. This strong wind was indeed pushing me along. It encouraged me to walk away from the place and the people that I didn't want to leave behind. *Yeah, it's time. Thanks.*

“Goodbye.”

I straightened myself and took a deep bow. This was the end of my fantastic, dreamlike days.

“Yes, goodbye.”

I felt like I heard someone reply in his voice. But it was just my imagination.

...Or was it? Nervously, I turned my head.

Strangely enough, I was afraid even though it was the voice that I had wanted to hear. Why did I hear the voice of someone who wasn't supposed to be here? Hearing his voice, I was convinced that he was here even though he shouldn't have been.

And when I had turned around, it really was him. Ash was here. There was no one else. Why? Well, it was Ash after all.

“I am glad I made it in time. Maika told me to wait around here, but the map that I used wasn't very precise. The carriage stopped a considerable distance ahead of where I was waiting. Sir George, you should redraw this map.”

I laughed. All I could feel was joy for Ash being himself on a day like this, and for Maika, who had probably planned all this.

“Ash...” I murmured.

“Yes, what is it? Maika did not tell me any details either, but is there something that was difficult to speak about inside the city?”

Not at all.

Surely Maika also knew this, but there was something that I had wanted to tell Ash in this spot. I wanted my last words of the days spent here to be my farewell to Ash.

“Ash, I just want to say...”

As I called out to him, Ash just politely replied with a “Yes,” waiting for me to speak.

I wanted to tell him to come with me, but I refrained from doing so. I wanted to tell him that I wished to meet again, but I stopped myself from saying that too. I took a deep breath. I realized that I was welling up, on top of my chest feeling like it was about to burst.

“Thanks. Goodbye.” I shouldn’t cry. This might be the last time—or rather, this should preferably be the last time—that I see Ash, so I don’t want his last memory of me to be my crying face.

“That was not a good farewell. We should redo this,” Ash suddenly said.

My tears dried up. Before I could ask any questions, Ash smiled. It was his usual smile that had always driven away my coldness.

He rephrased my words with his familiar warm smile. “Take care. See you again.”

His farewell implied a reunion in a loud voice. He let me know that I was always welcome to come back, and that he was waiting for me.

Don’t do this to me, Ash. If you say something so delightful, I can no longer hold in my tears.

Then, I recalled Maika telling me that it was okay to cry at times like these. I

could no longer hold them in.

“See you... later.” I wiped my cheeks. They were warm. “I’m off. You take care too. Let’s absolutely meet again someday.”

It felt so warm. There was no way I could have retained something this warm.

“Yes, let us meet again,” Ash responded.

“Really? Definitely? You promise?”

How selfish of me. Clearly it was only going to trouble him to promise me to definitely meet up again.

“Yes, I promise. I will definitely meet you again, if that is what you wish.”

And yet, Ash smilingly went along with my selfish desires. It was not fair of him. He didn’t let me hold back at all...

I felt like I was willing to give my life for Ash. And it was his fault that I couldn’t restrain that feeling.



Paper, Thou Who Art with Us

Before the beginning of winter, my shared room had turned into a single room. As someone who grew up in a poor village, having a private room was a dreamlike luxury, but I just could not bring myself to rejoice.

A bitter smile reflexively came over my face. When it was the two of us, the presence of a second person had never really bothered me, but now that presence was fading day by day, getting replaced by a cold bleakness. It was strange considering that the harsh cold of the winter had not yet set in.

Letting out a sigh on my own, I heard a knock on the door before seeing Lady Maika's face peek in. "Ash, do you have a moment?"

"Yes, sure. What is it?"

"I just wanted to talk a bit."

Sitting down on my bed, she smiled like a large flower. That smile felt a little out of season to me, but it was probably just because I was feeling down.

"It feels weird after all." As I sat down in the chair in front of her, Lady Maika looked around the room as she murmured. "I'm still not used to you being alone when coming to your room."

"Really?"

"Yeah. You were always sitting at your desk leaning forward with Arthur peeking from behind. Or you were sitting on this bed." She tapped a spot close to where she was sitting with the palm of her hand. "You both looked serious, yet you were having fun talking to each other. That was the scenery of this room."

Indeed, that was how we had spent most of our time. I did not remember ever running out of topics to talk about. It was only silent if one of us was deeply lost in thought, and that thought process eventually turned into our next conversation anyway.

“I was extremely jealous of Arthur.” Lady Maika puffed her cheeks. “I wanted to talk with you like that for however long I wanted... And when tired, I could have just gone to sleep and talked with you again when I woke up...” Her puffed cheeks deflated with a sigh. “Arthur must have had so much fun. I hope he’s not feeling lonely now.”

It seemed that Lady Maika herself felt sad that one of her friends had left. Her unseasonable, large flower-like smile was just her pretending to be fine.

“I am sure Arthur misses us already,” I said.

In the end, Lord Arthur had tried to contain her tears on the day of her departure, but failed to do so.

“Besides, I miss him too. Do you not feel lonely?” I asked Lady Maika.

After hearing my question, her lips started trembling. She must have been trying hard to conceal her emotions out of consideration for me, who she assumed felt much lonelier. She really was a kind girl. However, taking into account my past-life memories, I had more mental leeway, so I wanted her to let it all out.

When I nodded with a smile to signal that it was okay, Lady Maika averted her eyes and admitted that she felt lonely.

“That is natural. It shows how much time we spent together talking and doing various things. If a good friend like that goes somewhere far away, there is no way you would not feel sad.”

Needless to say, there were going to be regrets too. However, you could also rejoice at having made a friend who meant so much to you that their absence made you lonely. This was yet another illusion that helped you get through the harsh reality.

As I rubbed Lady Maika’s back and told her there was no need to hold back, she gave a slight nod before pressing her face against my arm. “I miss Arthur, Ash...”

“Me too.”

Looking down upon Lady Maika’s shivering head, it felt like my inner thoughts

were about to get drowned by a big wave. A crying girl was leaning against me on my bed in my private room. This situation had great destructive power. Even the greatest gentleman would have revealed the werewolf underneath his sheep's clothing when confronted with such a situation. *Stay strong, Ash.* If I had coerced her now, all the trust that I had built up would have turned to nothing.

I sat there for a long, long time, showing only kindness towards the warmth in my right arm. I wondered what would have happened if we both were a bit older. If we were both around fifteen years old, my inner pathos and her charm might have produced an adult-rated situation.

After her sobbing had calmed down, Lady Maika looked up at me with her blurry eyes. Even though she was still young, she was extremely cute. If she had been twenty years old, I would have had no choice but to ask her to marry me.

"Ash..." she spoke in a hoarse voice, with her lips still trembling, "You're not going anywhere, right? You will stay here in the city, right?"

Seeing her ask these questions with upturned eyes while tightly gripping my sleeve, I felt the urge to reassure her at once. However, my reasoning—famous for its intellect and calmness—suppressed my rash emotional drive.



“I am... not sure what will happen.”

I felt bad saying this to a girl who was feeling lonely, but I spoke the truth.

The majority of exchange students, including Lady Maika, were going to work in the city for several years after spending two years at the military academy. It was considered field training to brush up on what they had learned and put it into actual practice. However, I had only been accepted at the academy as an exception thanks to the kindness of Mrs. Yuika. Unlike Lady Maika and the other exchange students, I was in a position where I was supposed to go back to the village. I was only going to cause trouble for Mrs. Yuika if I shamelessly stayed here.

Moreover, I had to think about my parents. My father was still in the prime of his working life, and the villagers all helped each other out, but the fact that his first-born son was playing around outside at the age where he was supposed to properly start working must have been a considerable burden for him. Somehow, I had been able to do whatever pleased me for the past two years, so now I should have returned home at least once.

I let out a sigh at those two thoughts. My concerns for Mrs. Yuika especially wrenched my heart. “Considering my social standing, I should probably return to the village.”

On the opposite side of that sensible reasoning, I still wanted to stay here. I still fully intended to stay here. All my unfinished projects were gradually getting more interesting, and I still had not read all the books at the temple. I also did not want to give up all the personal connections I had made here. In fact, one of the reasons why I had assisted Sir George as an adjutant and helped with the administrative work of the count was to raise the likelihood of me staying here. I was hoping for someone to tell me, “You may have entered the academy under special circumstances, but you’re good at this work, so please keep working with us even after you graduate!” In that case, I could have used their request as an excuse with Mrs. Yuika, my parents, and any outsiders. And above anything else, if I had managed to secure a job, I could have lived my life without an allowance.

While I did have an income from Mr. Quid’s dealings, most of it was used for

research fees, so there was not much left to pay for the expenses of living by myself. Until now, I had lived off the allowance that Mrs. Yuika had been sending to both Lady Maika and me. In other words, I used the village's tax money for my studies. And I had a lot of fun. The taxpayers must have been furious that their hard-earned money was used this way, but as the person on the receiving end, it was an immensely pleasant feeling. It tasted like the forbidden fruit.

In any case, as the military academy was about to come to an end, I had been eagerly awaiting an invite, but to no avail. I was quite disheartened. But there was nothing I could have done. Lord Itsuki and Sir George must have been busy dealing with Lord Arthur's incident. *I'm sure that's the reason.* I did not want to think about any other possible explanation. I realized that I was an oddball, but I did not want to consider the possibility that it would have been politically safer to have me work somewhere further away to avoid trouble.

Well, things had calmed down again and there was still one month left until graduation. It was still possible that someone was going to invite me from here on out. Surely. Probably. Maybe.

If that failed, I would need to make use of my limit break and have some discussions. As such, I assumed it was almost certain that I was going to stay behind in the city, but it was not yet settled.

As I pointed a smile towards Lady Maika in an attempt to reassure her, I was met by the gaze of a carnivorous animal chasing its prey. There were no longer any traces of her earlier tears and shivers of loneliness. She looked like an animal ready to use its entire life force to bring down its prey.

"Ash, I need to go. I've got some urgent business to attend to."

"...Ah... Sure."

Her quiet voice sent chills down my spine. She really was Mrs. Yuika's daughter. Being threatened with that type of voice almost made me fall in love with her. *I think I really prefer strong women who lead me around by the nose to women who cry and rely upon me.*

Imagining that Lady Maika may not have cried at all earlier made me happy.

But I wondered what her urgent business could have been.

From that day onward, I started getting treated to dinner on an almost daily basis. First, I was invited by the guards serving under Sir George's command. As his adjutant, they were in fact also my subordinates, but since I was not officially appointed, I was not sure how to treat them. Generally, they were older than me and had overwhelmingly more experience too. Nevertheless, if they were going to pay for my meal, I was more than happy to tag along with these friendly bunch of older brothers and middle-aged men.

"Sir Adjutant Ash!"

At the guard's regular drinking tavern, Roland, who was the leader of the soldiers under Sir George's direct control, called out to me with a red face. Contrary to what his burly, muscular physique suggested, he had a well-organized brain stored away inside his bald head, which he put to use to help Sir George manage the equipment. While many soldiers subscribed to the supremacy of the body and brute force, he was a valuable exception making use of his brains.

"Yes, what is it?"

"Sir Adjutant, I've heard you're about to graduate from the academy!"

"Yes, it has been two years already."

"Congratulations!"

"Thank you."

When I replied, Roland turned his beer mug upside down and pressed it against his lips before readily coming closer to my face.

"So what do you say, Sir Adjutant! After graduating, would you like to join the regional troops officially? We'd all be more than happy!"

All the others drew closer, agreeing with his statement.

"That would indeed not be a bad choice, but I cannot just decide that on my own. I would have to pass the enlistment exam first."

"You don't need that! And if anyone has a problem with that, we'll put the

screws on them!”

The others vigorously agreed with his extreme statement.

The muscular density in the room was something else. Sir George’s subordinates were all more or less good at non-manual labor, with Roland at the top, but their muscles were not just mere decorations either. The ones most likely to voice any complaints would have been everyone at the human resources department, but those were all influential people with whom it was preferable not to mess. And the big boss in charge of everyone was still the count himself.

“Well, please calm down for now. I do not want to waste your careers.”

“Our success is not really worth all that much! It’s thanks to you that the equipment management—that painful task—has become so much easier...!”

For some reason, the bald middle-aged man burst into tears. The others were also shedding tears while waving their tightly grasped fists.

“Sir Adjutant, please keep working with us!”

“We need you!”

“Without your processing power, work is going to get harder again...!”

“Don’t abandon us! Please, we’ll do anything!”

I would have loved to hear those lines coming from young beautiful women.

As if the three gods had heard my wishes, my next invitation was from a group of girls, consisting of Mrs. Rihn’s maid colleagues working at the administrative halls.

They were wearing simple, embroidered, dark blue dress robes. The design was similar to that of the uniforms worn by the priests. These common points demonstrated how the maid profession had its origin with the priests of the Church. I had heard that it was still the same design today because personnel from the Church had acted as civil officials when the kingdom was built from the rubble of the collapsed late period ancient civilization.

Even omitting that trivia, the Church was considered the starting point of the

intellectual class. Regardless of gender, the common route to entering the stage of politics was through receiving education as a priest apprentice at the temple. As such, it was no surprise that the civil officials were attached to the uniforms they had worn since their training days. Of course, they were not exactly the same. Since maids also had to interact with guests of honor, their outfit was a more sophisticated and florid design.

For example, the collar was open with buttons up to the chest. It had a similar feeling to an evening dress. Depending on the cape, its impression changed, thus making it possible to match it to various occasions. For solemn ceremonies and important meetings, they wore a tight, long, and thick cape that gave them a composed look. Meanwhile, when showing up at busier places like tea parties or dinners, they loosened the cape, or alternatively they did not fix it at the front, wearing it open. Displaying the open collar, they invited people to have a closer look at them. It was also possible to casually wear it or not wear it at all, with all the chest buttons open. The latter came in handy when they needed to entice a womanizer.

But there was an even more frequent use for it. Namely, during winter hell, when their fangs came out and they were ready to pounce at the endless amount of work. As it was almost literally a fight for their lives, they naturally wanted to be as comfortable as possible. They looked like a secondary subordinate or even an outsider, but all of the maids working at the administrative halls during winter were glued to their desks in that outfit. As someone who had helped out in those hellish halls, I had grown accustomed to these exciting outfits. I had paid close attention to the maids' aura, which screamed, "If any pervert's going to interrupt me now, I'll punch them in the face."

Incidentally, all the maids who had invited me out to dinner were wearing those exciting outfits. However, there was no trace of their usual frightening aura.

"Do you like the meat, Ash? Do you want to eat more?" Mrs. Kikyo, the maid sitting in front of me with her chin resting in her hands, asked me with a sweet smile.

"Ash, I brought some more alcohol. Let's drink!" My neighbor to the left was

Azami, who snuggled into her seat with a jar of wine in her hands.

“U-Uhm... I-I...” On the right of me sat Renge, faltering with a bright red face.

The three of them were among the youngest maids. Mrs. Kikyo was already married, but the other two were single. That probably explained our seating arrangement. Sitting next to a married woman at dinner would have only created misunderstandings. Still, all of them were well endowed, so it was a sight to behold. I learned the true power of the maid outfits.

“The meal is extremely delicious, but do you not think you are all a bit too close?”

Especially from the left and right, a warm feeling enveloped my arms. While there was no such feeling at the front, I had a very good view thanks to Mrs. Kikyo’s slouching position at the table. While looking at her, I felt guilty towards her husband, but she just kept inviting me tilting her head and smiling.

“What else are we supposed to do? You know how bad our eyesight is. If we get any further away, it will look like we are glaring at you.”

Those maids who participated as fighters in the winter Hell all had bad eyesight as an occupational disease. As a result, their expressions often looked like they were glaring even though it was not the case. In fact, the aura screaming, “If any pervert’s going to interrupt me now, I’ll punch them in the face,” was a result of fatigue and eye strain for many. Of course, there were also maids who meant it and there had been cases of impudent fellows having their front teeth broken after manifesting themselves as perverts.

“I am aware of that. That is why I do not mind if you are all squinting.”

Since I was used to it, I would not have minded if they interacted with me at a normal distance.

After telling them this, the person on my left got even closer to me. “Hehe, do you not like this?”

Azami had drunk more wine herself than she had poured out for me, so her body temperature was hot. *Unfortunately, I love this!*

However, it would have been problematic to yell this out loud, so I tried

acting like a gentleman.

“I am embarrassed because of how much I am enjoying it. You are all such lovely women, so I feel like I really need to restrain myself.”

It was tough. On the same level as taking on a bear in a one-on-one fight.

“Hehe, did you hear that, Renge? You should get closer too and make him even happier.”

“Y-Yes! A-Ash... p-please don’t mind me...!” Announcing her hug, Renge clung onto me with a bright red face.

Strange. I don’t remember coming to this type of bar? There won’t be any scary middle-aged man asking me for a sum that I definitely can’t pay after this, right?

As uneasiness mixed itself in with my happiness, Mrs. Kikyo started giggling. “Don’t worry, Ash. Consider this a token of gratitude from all the maids.”

“Gratitude?”

“Yes, for helping us out last winter as well as this winter.”

In order to research the distribution of goods and resources within the territory, as well as increase the production output again a bit to accommodate my needs, I was indeed helping them.

“Thanks to you, there is less of a burden on us.” Mrs. Kikyo’s voice sounded bittersweet.

I see. There’s still this much left even after reducing the workload.

Azami strongly agreed after emptying her glass of wine. “She’s right. We were at our limits, and every year there were people writhing in strange voices.”

“Teehee. There were at least three each year.” That really did sound like hell. “But last year it didn’t happen at all and this year we can already see how much easier it is. We can even have some time off like this in the middle of winter!” Mrs. Kikyo’s wink pierced straight through my heart.

Damn. This reminded me of Mrs. Yuika. Had she by any chance learned that technique here at the administrative halls?

“I-I-I’m... r-really glad th-that you helped... m-me directly with work. I-If I can do anything to repay you...” Renge expressed her gratitude with a bright red face.

Having her this close to me was already repaying me more than enough.

“It feels like this is excessive as a token of gratitude, so I will come help you again later.”

“Really?!”

After raising her face in delight for a moment, she once again faced down in embarrassment. Seeing that, Azami started petting the head of her junior over my shoulder.

“I’m happy for you, Renge. Ash said he’s enjoying himself.”

“Y-Yes...!”

Stuck between the lovely senior and junior maid, I turned into a happiness sandwich. Hopefully my upper lip had not extended and made me look like an idiot. I was too scared to check.

Worrying about Mrs. Kikyo’s gaze, I changed the subject. “I gladly accept your feelings of gratitude, but I am not the only one who helped you, so you should not give me any special treatment...”

Particularly this year, I was proud of what a big help the people from the study group had been. Mother Yae had even called us the strongest class in the history of the academy.

It appeared that Mrs. Kikyo was also aware of their competency. “Yes, if it were just you alone it probably wouldn’t have affected the workload that much. Starting with Lady Maika and Reina, I was surprised by all the students.”

“In that case...”

“However, all the students said the same. It is *you* who gave them their strength.”

“What?”

As I tilted my head to the side, I bumped into Renge’s head, who was still

hugging me.

“Oh, I am sorry. Are you okay?”

“Eek! I-I-I’m fine, thank you for the bump!”

“You sound a bit off...”

Was she really okay? It was a light bump after all, so it could not have been too bad.

More importantly, I had to reply to Mrs. Kikyo. “It is true that I am teaching them at the study group, but their brilliance is a result of their own will and efforts.”

It did not matter how much effort I put into my teaching if someone did not work hard and did not have any motivation—they were never going to improve. And moreover, Lady Maika did a lot more teaching than me, so I felt bad receiving all the prestige.

“Th-That’s not true at all!”

There was a strong objection coming from my right in regards to my determination directed towards Mrs. Kikyo.

“Y-Yes, your own feelings and motivation are important, b-but there are some things that you just can’t do on your own. Y-Y-You gave them the push necessary to move forward!”

Azami was cheering Renge on as she stated her opinion. I almost felt like joining her cheering efforts. Renge’s breath was extremely heavy since earlier. I was worried that she was going to fall over from oxygen deficiency.

“And your help is extremely important and very welcomed...! S-So... You’re so cool!”

Renge’s eyes were tearing up as she looked straight at me. I did not see her taking any breaths for a while now, so she must have been in pain.

I looked at her, imploring her to resume breathing, as Mrs. Kikyo murmured something strange. “Renge is the only one that thinks you’re cool, you know? That’s not a shared opinion of the maids, so do with that information as you will.”

“Okay...?”

“By the way, I think you’re cute.”

That made sense considering the difference in age.

As I nodded in agreement, Azami took the opportunity to voice her opinion too. “I think you’re a laid-back guy.”

“I am flattered.”

What high praise. Even though I realized they said it out of gratitude, it put me in a good mood.

Meanwhile, Renge, who had praised me first, chimed in again. “D-Did I say something weird...?”

Having failed to resume her breathing, she finally fainted. Since she was still leaning against me, when she crumbled down, her head landed on my lap.

“Well played, Renge.”

“She’s a natural airhead.”

“Wait, you two, this is not the time to be joking. Should we not worry about her?”

They had nerves of steel, being able to have such banter in front of their fainted colleague. They must have grown accustomed to people falling over during winter Hell at the administrative halls.

Unfortunately, I was not as used to this kind of situation, so I parted her bangs to check on her. For now, she did not seem to be in any pain, and her breathing was normal. Her breasts were moving up and down regularly, meaning she had safely resumed breathing at a normal speed. However, the excitement factor of her chest had suddenly increased to a point where I could no longer take my eyes off it. I would have said that it was purely for medical reasons, but I was probably too fixated for that.

Mrs. Kikyo whispered to me in a sweet voice. “If you work here, we will be able to thank you like this in the future too.”

“And a lot. Hehe.” Azami was also whispering close to my ears.

What a passionate and charming proposal! Were they saying that, since there is a Hell here, there is also a Heaven?

“That is a very appealing proposal, but unfortunately, it is not that easy to get employed here.”

It was the height of regret. Heaven lay right beside me, but I could not enter.

“Don’t worry about that, Ash. If you’re interested, just let us know. We will have a word with Lord Itsuki.”

“Yes! If it’s you, one word is enough to get you employed right away!”

Imbued with a lingering attachment to heaven, I smilingly told them to stop joking, but Mrs. Kikyo and Azami both replied with a gorgeous smile.

“It really only takes one word. If Lord Itsuki refuses your job application, we will quit.”

“And that is the shared opinion of all the maids!”

While their mouths were smiling, their eyes were not. It was the same expression they had when they were exchanging blows with their work in the middle of hell.

My next invite came from Mr. Quid. He treated me to dinner in a private room at Chef Yacoo’s home restaurant, Cinnamon’s Light. Lately I had been eating so much delicious food that it felt like I had gained weight.

“I can’t believe it’s already been two years since you arrived in the city.”

“Yes, it was a blink of time.”

That reminded me that, when I first arrived at the city, Mr. Quid was showing me around and this pork is delicious. Its taste interrupted my nostalgia trip. As expected from Chef Yacoo. He had painstakingly seasoned the fat with the utmost care, giving me an explosion of taste inside my mouth.

“Don’t you agree that the food here is extremely delicious? You can’t get that back at the village.”

“Yes. Unfortunately, such an affluent village does not exist yet.”

I sighed before taking a sip of vegetable soup. The flavor of the soft vegetables blew through my nasal cavity right to my brain. I wanted to bring food as good as this to my hometown as soon as possible.

“By the way, I visited Chief Klein’s house the other day.”

“Oh, did something happen?”

Mr. Quid had continued to trade with Noscula village even after opening up his shop, but it was rare for him to go there himself. The important negotiations where he needed to be present usually did not take place in small villages. He was only supposed to go to the village for big negotiations, but Mr. Quid played it off with a smile.

“No, no. I just went there for a seasonal greeting.”

“Is that so? That sounds tough, considering how busy you are.”

I felt a bit sorry for a rapidly growing, up-and-coming merchant like him having to make courtesy calls at villages where he already had good relationships.

“This is an important part of the job too. Anyway, when I talked to Chief Klein and Lady Yuika, they gave me a letter for you.”

“For me? Not for Maika?”

How unusual of them. Their messages for me were normally included in letters for Lady Maika. This was the first time in the past two years that they had sent one directly to me. It was village chief Klein’s seal, but the letters were Mrs. Yuika’s handwriting. I was slightly excited to open a letter from my first crush in this world.

After Mr. Quid cut it open, I proceeded to read its contents.

Naturally, it was not a love letter. They congratulated me on finishing my two years at the military academy, and they praised me for my efforts that they had heard talked about in rumors. However, if that was everything that they wanted to tell me, they could have easily included it in a letter addressed to Lady Maika. The reason why they had gone so far to even include the village chief’s seal was the following passage:

“In anticipation of your further growth and flourishing, we will not stop our support for your continued activities in the city if that is in accordance with your wishes. As the head of Noscula village, I have also received permission from your parents. We strongly hope that you will follow your heart’s desires.”

Mrs. Yuika was a goddess. Who said there were only three gods? *Just look at these divine words.* It was almost as if she had directly heard my concerns. And the letter was not only filled with kindness, but it also carried the strength to push along a helpless, lost soul. If this was not a prophecy from a goddess, then what else could it be? My goddess had commanded me to play around without any reservations. *Hooray!*

As I was frolicking at the words of the divine goddess Yuika, Mr. Quid showed a gentle smile. Maybe he had also felt the divine power.

“Is it good news?”

“Yes! Very much so!”

“I’m glad to hear that it makes you happy—I owe you so much, after all. It was worth the trouble of rushing to the village.”

“Thank you!” I bowed with a bright smile brimming with hope for the future.

Although the way he had just put it almost made it sound as if he had gone to the village for my sake. *Must be my imagination.*

More than anything, I felt extremely blessed right now. I had received job offers from various places, and both my parents and my benefactor had given me their approval. This meant that I could stay in the city even after graduating from the academy. I had to give my best to live up to the expectations of the divine goddess Yuika. *I’ll grow fast and flourish as much as I can!*

The final invitation came from Lord Itsuki. Going by way of Lady Maika, the acting count had called us around for a private dinner. I saw it as a good opportunity to ask him his opinion on me getting a job with the military or at the administrative halls. Considering the guards’ enthusiasm and the maids’ smiles, this was bound to end in bloodshed if I did not talk things through with Lord Itsuki. It may have sounded like a joke, but the thought sent real chills

down my spine.

Still, that kind of talk could wait until after the splendid dinner at the count's mansion. Chef Yacoo had prepared some masterpieces that focused more on quality than quantity. It would have been rude to eat this while feeling nervous. The Hamburg steak was accompanied by a sauce made from grated apples this time. It had an exquisite bittersweet taste. Did he adjust the ratio of beef and pork to match the sauce? It tasted so refreshing that I could have eaten any amount of this.

"This is great. So delicious. Chef Yacoo really has created his own version of the Hamburg steak. What great skill and effort!"

While I nodded and tried eating as elegantly as possible, Lady Maika was awfully quiet next to me. Normally, she would have admired Chef Yacoo's amazing Hamburg steak together with me, but today she was just silently eating. It was almost as if she did not taste its splendid flavor. Something was wrong.

"Maika?"

"Yes, Ash?"

Her voice was stiff, just like when she was nervous. Having been childhood friends for thirteen years, I could tell immediately.

Since it did not seem like she was unwell, I whispered to her with a sigh of relief. "I do not know what happened, but please ask for help before it gets too bad. I assume you do not want to let this delicious meal go to waste."

"Y-You know something's wrong?"

"Of course. Although you have become quite good at hiding your emotions."

If not for her unnatural lack of excitement for her favorite food, I may not have noticed it either. According to anti-Maika intelligence, the Hamburg steak was extremely effective against her. That being said, it appeared that she was getting better at subtle communication. I decided to report her progress when writing my letter of gratitude to the divine goddess Yuika.

"But I'm no match for you, Ash." With a composed expression, she dropped

her shoulders and pouted. It seemed that her tension was gone, and she smilingly took a bite of Hamburg steak. "It's so good."

"Yes, we should encourage Chef Yacoo's assistance to keep developing the cultural cuisine at this rate. That will surely also stoke enthusiasm for the agricultural development plan."

Once people had enough to eat, they started fussing over quality. Someone who was not sure whether they were going to have food on their table tonight did not worry about selective breeding for the next harvest. It was easy to eat for the sake of living, but it was difficult to live for the sake of eating. That was exactly why we had to promote the agricultural development plan, which supported the foundation of food. After all, I wanted to eat delicious food until my belly was full. Yet another reason to peacefully stay in the city.

Catching a fleeting glance of Lord Itsuki, our eyes met. It appeared that he had also tried starting a conversation.

"That reminds me, Ash!"

"Yes, what is it, Lord Itsuki?"

I put down my cutlery and invited him to continue. Lord Itsuki dampened his lips with wine in order to get ready to talk.

"Don't you think it would be better for you to stay in the city to progress that plan?"

"Yes, I agree."

Or rather, it would definitely be impossible in the village.

"As a territory, we have invested a lot into that plan, so I would prefer to keep it going now. So, what do you think? Would you like to stay in the city and keep working on your plans?" Lord Itsuki took a deep breath and bent forward. "To be more specific, would you like to officially enter government service here?"

This was what they called a godsend.

After finally receiving the offer, I involuntarily smiled, but I immediately suppressed it. We were in the middle of a serious conversation, so I should not appear too sloppy. However, it backfired, and seemed to make Lord Itsuki

anxious.

He started arguing vehemently with a stiff expression, saying, “I understand that you may be worried about your family in the village, but I will support you however I can.”

“What support do you mean?”

I would not have minded immediately agreeing to the offer, but I was curious about the conditions. It was not like I thought about getting him to increase the support. *Not at all.*

“We will provide you with accommodation, and I can promise you a good wage too. Considering your achievements, that is not a strange offer at all. I will also respect your wishes in regard to where you want to work.”

That was more than satisfactory for a farmer’s brat. I did not have any complaints. Except maybe that it sounded so good it was a bit scary.

“Those are some incredible conditions. Are you sure you want to show such lavish hospitality to someone like me?”

“I always considered soliciting you. Or rather, I had never thought about you leaving the city.” Lord Itsuki momentarily shifted his gaze towards Lady Maika. “At any rate, you seem to enjoy living here, and there are several ongoing projects that you started, so the possibility that you were going back to the village in the middle of all this never even occurred to me.”

As a matter of fact, I had never really considered it an option myself, so he was not wrong. Looking at my lifestyle, it was clear that I intended to live in the city.

Although he had done nothing wrong, Lord Itsuki apologetically looked right past me. “Thinking about it now, I was careless. My apologies. Would you mind staying in the city and lending me and the region your strength a little longer?”

Seeing him keep such a low profile brought something to my mind. And that something was sitting right next to me. All the happenings that had unfolded over the past few days... Looking back at it, they had started after my conversation with that certain someone sitting next to me.

“I understand that you already have offers from the armed forces and the administration... Both of them want your talent. If I offer you favorable working conditions, surely they will be happy for you and not complain.”

If he knew about their passionate recruitment techniques, he must have also come into contact with their enthusiasm.

“Did you by any chance also talk to them?” I asked.

“Yes, we directly negotiated. They had a quite threatening attitude.”

Lord Itsuki, who did not get agitated on the battlefield, had a distant look about him. It must have been scarier than any battle he had fought. I imagined that both instances were more like raids than negotiations. He was quite outspoken about getting thoroughly threatened.

“Therefore, as a result of listening to the opinions of my subordinates from both the military and the literary arts, as well as my own consideration, I would love for you to stay in the city even after you graduate. I invited you out here tonight to ask for your opinion. So, what do you think?”

“I am greatly honored.”

I was glad we had quickly reached a conclusion without me having to do any troublesome convincing. As such, I accepted with a broad grin.

“Oh! So you accept my offer!”

“Yes, with great pleasure. Just the other day, Mr. Quid delivered me a letter saying that Mrs. Yuika had received my parents’ approval, dispelling my only remaining worry.”

Although, to be honest, in regard to my parents, it was not really a big concern.

“I see! That’s great. I’m happy you accepted!” After nodding in delight, he raised both his clenched fists in Lady Maika’s direction. “Your uncle pulled it off, Maika!”

“Haha, you don’t have to celebrate this much. Ash will think of you as strange.”

I knew what was going on. This was the voice she used when she was trying to

hide her impatience. Judging from the series of events, this must have been her doing. She probably devised various strategies after learning that I wanted to remain in the city. As expected from the beloved daughter of my divine goddess Yuika, she was growing stronger. How promising.

A Certain Compiler's Afterword

Thank you for taking this book into your hands. Thanks to everyone who read the original version and the edited version of *Fushi no Kami*, I was able to release the third volume. I also want to express my gratitude to everyone involved in the publication of this book, which ranges from the actual production, to the transport to each bookstore, to the display and sales at the various shops. I'm glad this book has found its place in society. Once again, thank you very much.

As a result, I'm able to present you the third edition of my sightseeing report. Continuing on from last time, I have come to visit a famous spot in Itsutsu city. This is a place that most likely anyone who's ever been to this city has visited at least once. Formerly, it was used as a large central public square, but now it is known and loved as the Feather Square. The name represents the feather of that well-known phoenix. And it is the same square where Ash's name reverberated through the entire kingdom after the unveiling of the tendon-powered model plane.

Walking around this square, you need to watch out not to crash into a plane. It's a place known for "granting the wish of anyone that lets a model plane fly." Every day, countless dreams try taking off at this square. The designated flying area is limited, but there are still some people who spread their wings a bit too wide, just like a certain someone...

Incidentally, even if such a runaway plane bumps into someone, it doesn't really result in any trouble. I was convinced of the whole thing as soon as I heard those planes are referred to as "Ash." I mean, if it's Ash, it really can't be helped. Besides, having a plane bump into you is considered a sign of good fortune, and the shops around the square will offer you various free services if it happens to you. In a way, it is actually something to be envied for. I tried bumping into one myself, but unfortunately, Ash seemed to be busy somewhere else today.

By the way, there are also couples among those who let airplanes fly. One of them throws the plane while the other one catches it. The pairs range from lovers waiting to get married to newlyweds. You can even see young boys and girls that have not confessed their feelings for each other yet. Usually, it is the boy who asks the girl in a nervous voice if she wants to catch his airplane. That is because one of the selling points of this square is the belief that “lovers who throw and catch a plane will build a harmonious family.” (Although, for some reason, marriages resulting from this union tend to lean towards the wife wearing the pants).

Written while watching model planes being thrown around as if it was the most natural thing in the world.

Mizuumi Amakawa

Illustrator:
Mai Okuma

Fushi no Kami 3

REBUILDING CIVILIZATION

STARTS WITH A VILLAGE



《《 ITSUKI 《《

《《 ARTHUR 《《

“So...
Does Ash have
a message
for me?”

“He said,
‘Please look forward
to the result!’”



Bonus Short Stories

A Kitchen's Warmth

"Wash ya hands and chop this up, will ya?"

This had been Chef Yacoo's response when I had gone to say farewell on the morning of my departure. He'd handed me an onion.

"Uhm... Chef Yacoo."

"Only one. Surely ya got this much time?"

Of course I did. Unlike two years ago, I was now perfectly capable of chopping up an onion on the fly.

It was so early in the morning that none of the other students at the dormitory were awake. Standing in the kitchen next to the chef, I grabbed the knife and set the onion on top of the cutting board. I secured the onion with my left hand and made sure that no fingers were in the cutting line of the knife.

As I sliced up the onion, I was reminded of my first time on kitchen duty, the day Ash had moved in. Back then we had also started by chopping up onions. I had never cooked before, so I was quite clumsy with my hands. Looking back on it now, it was so embarrassing... To think that now I was effortlessly chopping up an onion while reminiscing about the past. And much faster and cleaner too. *If I dare say so myself, I've become quite good at this*, I thought while looking at the evenly chopped-up onion on the cutting board.

I informed the chef that I was done with the task. "I finished... Chef Yacoo?"

The chef was already looking at the cutting board with a serious expression. "Ya getting good at this. I see I won't have to worry about ya going hungry if ya have to cook for yourself."

"Yeah, I'm sure I could handle it."

Since Ash was always cooking on holidays too, I had gained much experience

helping him. Whenever Maika and Reina joined us, it was even livelier, and we had lots of laughs together. Even though I had so many fond memories of the time when I learned how to cook, I may not be able to use my cooking skills once I got back to the royal capital. The more I thought about the conservative attitudes back at home, the more attached I grew to this place.

Watching me contemplate my future, Chef Yacoo snorted. “I don’t know much about ya. Maybe ya won’t ever set foot in a kitchen again.” While he was talking, the chef put the onion that I had chopped up into the pot and started stirring. “But remember the effort that goes into cooking. Makes ya appreciate the meal on your plate.”

Not getting much stew on the plate could, for example, mean that there wasn’t much firewood available. And if you kept getting the same menu, that could be a sign of poor harvests. A sloppy arrangement could indicate a lack of manpower. Or if the combination of foods served was odd, that may point towards bad leadership in the kitchen.

“Make sure to eat enough. That way ya’ll know what’s going on in the kitchen. And knowing what’s going on in there helps ya understand ya employees. And understanding ya employees helps ya understand the world. Which in turn...”

I responded to Chef Yacoo’s probing look with a nod. “Helps me understand what I need to do... I think.”

In my current state—Ash’s back crossed my mind, followed by an image of Maika reaching out to me—in my current state, I was sure that I could move forward. With Maika’s help, I had been able to chase his back after all, so I felt like I could do anything.

“Knowing that, ya will be fine anywhere.”

The chef scooped a bit of soup out of the pot and into a bowl, then handed it to me. A sweet yet mild scent tickled my nose. It was mile soup. The first dish I had ever cooked together with everyone.

“No one can live without food. So make sure to savor it, Arthur.”

Chef Yacoo, who hadn’t even asked for our names on our first meeting, had just called me Arthur. Having my name called in this kitchen, where only

cooking skills mattered, essentially meant that he approved of my cooking.

“I will, Chef Yacoo. Thank you for the lesson.”

In gratitude, I bowed to the esteemed master chef. I felt like I had been quite the troublesome and unworthy pupil. Nonetheless, I was deeply grateful to the kind chef, who had taught me carefully, albeit with a sharp tongue.

“Don’t be ridiculous! That’s not even worth mentioning. If ya ever come back, be prepared to slice some onions.”

And thus, I somehow ended up receiving instructions for my next visit alongside my graduation remarks.

Maika’s Way Forward

Congratulations to myself for making Ash stay behind. I can’t thank myself enough.

I felt so relieved. If by any chance Ash had really returned to the village, it would mean that I couldn’t predict his actions at all. I knew that he definitely wouldn’t have been able to stay still in the village. He could have suddenly set out to the royal capital to continue with his work. After all, Folke and Arthur were both there. I could already vividly imagine him hitting the road with just a bag and a smile on his face. *It really was a close one...*

Just thinking about the possibility of Ash going so far away that I could no longer say good morning to him made me shudder. But if it ever happened, I was going to join him in the capital. What about my role as one of the count’s prospective successors, you ask? I could care less about something that interfered with my future marriage with Ash.

Although I feel bad for Arthur. Maybe it would have been better for Ash to go to the capital? My chest tightened as an image of Arthur smiling while holding back tears flashed into my head. *I hate that expression... Holding back sadness and pain is not good for you.* I wondered if there was a way to bring her back here.

“Hm... Doesn’t seem possible anytime soon.”

At the moment, I was powerless. Or rather, I didn't even know what the problem was, nor what exactly needed to be done to bring her back. I was like Hermes, who dreamt of building a plane—he knew his destination, but didn't know how to get there. How could you make any plans for a journey if you didn't even know what to pack?

“But I don't want to give up! Someday I'll rescue her from the capital and then we can have dinner with everyone!”

I had no intention of giving up. After all, I was Ash's childhood friend. As someone who fell in love again and again with a boy who didn't know the meaning of the expression “giving up,” I couldn't throw the towel either.

Ash had shown me the light so many times. No matter how dark the path forward may be, I was no longer going to be scared like I was back at the village. Using Ash's light, I was going to illuminate the way and move forward one step at a time.

It must have been my resolution to win over Ash that was telling me that I could follow him anywhere. No matter how dark the path, I was ready to walk beside him. I may still not have been able to fully keep up with Ash, but compared to my past self, who stood petrified at the first signs of dusk, I had become much stronger. And I planned on becoming stronger still.

“And to do that, I need to study!”

Depending on Ash's next move, I may have just renounced my right of succession, but inheriting the title of count could have also brought with it some nice advantages. For now, I was studying for that position. *I should go help my uncle Itsuki with his work.* Staying still here was only going to remind me of Arthur and make me sad.

As I stood up from the bed, I heard a knock on the door.

Oh! I recognize that knock!

“Mai—”

“Ash! Come in!”

“—ka. Fast as always.”

I opened the door at full speed and found Ash with a tray in his hands. I had actually been slower than usual. Since I hadn't noticed his footsteps walking in the corridor, I had heard him call the first syllable of my name through the closed door.

"What's up, Ash? Sweets? Did you bake sweets?"

A fragrant aroma rose up from the tray he was holding. Ah, it smelled like Tanya-style pancakes.

"Yes, freshly made. Would you like some?"

"Yes, of course!"

Helping my uncle Itsuki with his work could wait. Ash's freshly baked pancakes had higher priority.

"But if you had said something, I could've helped. Call me next time!" *We could have spent some time together.*

While I pouted, Ash smiled as he put down the tray on my desk and took out a spoon. It was not his usual fiery smile, which he gave when charging ahead towards his goals. It was a soft smile, like a gentle sun ray on a spring day.

"This is a gift especially for you, so I could not really let you help."

"A gift? Especially for me?" My cheeks felt hot. *Ash, don't you think saying, "Especially for you" with such a gentle smile on your face is a bit unfair?*

"Yes. It must be exhausting for you to always stay bright and try to cheer up the others, even though you are quite sad yourself that Arthur is gone."

Ah! My heart skipped a beat! He noticed all that? Even though he usually doesn't pay attention to the people around him as he single-mindedly rushes at full speed towards his dreams? That's so... unfair.

"So I made these as a special reward for your extraordinary kindness." He smiled and held out a spoon with a piece of pancake.

What?! That's against the rules! Ash's playing dirty! But that's exactly why I love him so much!

Reina's Passion

"I'm tired..."

The moment I returned to my room, I couldn't help but let that out in a deep voice. Speaking in that voice on the outside would have destroyed my image as the dorm supervisor Rihn's daughter—a reliable, good student.

"Welcome back, Reina."

My roommate looked up from the book she was reading to greet me. Judging from her squinted eyes, it must have been a difficult one. She gave me a radiant smile, which immediately soothed my tired soul. It was like the charm of an innocent child. No wonder all the boys looked in her direction whenever she smiled.

"I'm home, Maika."

"You look exhausted."

I didn't even have the strength to reciprocate her smile. I knew I made her worry sometimes, but I was so grateful to have a roommate. Especially if it was someone who spoiled me like Maika did.

"Yeah, I am. Hermes and Belgo's crew..."

My migraine worsened just remembering it. Those children (most of them were older than me, but they didn't behave like it at all) started fights over the most trivial things!

"Can you believe it? They argue about who gets to use the tools first, who carved the wood the cleanest, who makes the best constructions... You wouldn't believe how often I had to scold them today."

My voice sounded hoarse as I grumbled in exasperation. *Next time, I shouldn't shout as much.* I needed to come up with a different method to avoid harming my voice. Come to think of it, the pots we used in the dormitory kitchen made a loud noise whenever someone accidentally bumped into them on cooking duty. *Maybe I could use those—bang on them to drown out the children's loud voices.*

"You look like you're having fun."

I wondered what my face looked like when I heard her say that. I felt my cheeks grow a bit hot.

“A-Anyways, w-what about you? You were doing research on bricks, weren’t you? How’s that?”

“I found some documents, which we split up among the group. I’m reading them now, but they are very detailed, and there are a lot of words that I don’t know. I’m assuming they refer to different types of soil and working methods, but I’m not sure...” Maika folded her arms and groaned.

It was strange how she looked cute even when she wrinkled her eyebrows. Whenever I did that, people just got scared. *Maybe I should make an effort to appear a bit more charming?* No, that wouldn’t suit me. I must have been really exhausted for my thoughts to even go there.

“What’s wrong, Reina? Something on your mind?”

“I was just thinking you’ve got a lot on your shoulders too. Don’t you feel exhausted?”

“I think we’re both feeling the same way.”

Maika, who had a radiant smile on her face, and I, who was angry and exasperated, were feeling the same way? If that was the case, then we surely had very different responses. *Just look at Maika—she is so cute and pretty when she is smiling.*

“Really? I’m just getting mad and scaring people,” I said.

“You’re cute and pretty.”

W-What makes you say that? I wondered what face I was making right now. In an attempt to find out, I touched my cheeks. They felt hot.

“Heh heh, we’re the same after all. It’s nice to see boys getting absorbed in something, isn’t it?”

“Oh, i-is that what you mean? Well, it’s not bad, I guess... Just generally speaking, of course!” Now even my ears were feeling hot.

“Heh heh, you’re so cute! And yeah, I would say it’s fun rather than exhausting.”

G-Got it. So let's just wrap this topic up...

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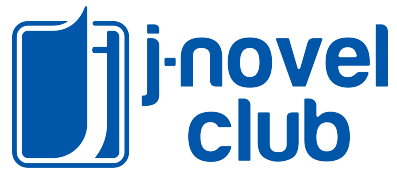
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Fushi no Kami: Rebuilding Civilization Starts With a Village Volume 3

by Mizuumi Amakawa

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